

**EXTRANJERO EN MI TIERRA
(STRANGER IN MY HOMELAND):
MIGRANT REALITIES IN MEXICO'S RIVIERA MAYA**

BY

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Abstract

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The explosive growth of Mexico's tourism industry in the Yucatán over the past thirty years has exacerbated the poor living and working conditions of thousands of immigrants in Mexico's Caribbean coast. My main research question asks how migrant workers experience discrimination and human rights abuses on Mexico's Riviera Maya (Quintana Roo). Ethnographic field research and the collection of testimonies focuses on the ways in which construction workers are exploited and forced to live in squalid housing and have poor working conditions. Data analysis reveals that indigenous migrant workers from Chiapas and Guatemala are subject to discrimination by other migrants, employers, and police officials. Conclusions suggest that poor working and living conditions for migrant workers are caused by the lack of legal protection, inequalities, marginalization, and racism that exists in Mexico's glamorous paradise.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Los emigrantes, ahora-Eduardo Galeano “Bocas del tiempo,”

Los náufragos de la globalización peregrinan inventando caminos, queriendo casa, golpeando puertas: las puertas que se abren, mágicamente, al paso del dinero, se cierran en sus narices. Algunos consiguen colarse. Otros son cadáveres que la mar entrega a las orillas prohibidas, o cuerpos sin nombre que yacen bajo tierra en el otro mundo adonde querían llegar.

-Eduardo Galeano, *Bocas del tiempo*

These pilgrims, shipwrecked by globalization, wander about unearthing roads, seeking homes, knocking on doors that swing open when money calls but slam shut in their faces. Some manage to sneak in. Others arrive as corpses that the sea delivers to the forbidden shore, or as nameless bodies buried in the world they hoped to reach.¹

The geopolitical location of Chiapas in southern México has contributed significantly to its role as a receiving state for migrants from Guatemala, a transit state for many Central Americans who use México to cross into the United States, and a migrant sending state either to other regions of México or the United States. Due to historical economic crises, natural disasters, and political turmoil in the last century, the dynamics of migration in the southern region of México are still changing. Particularly in the last decade, Chiapas has emerged as a major sending state of migrants to the United States and to other regions of México, such as

¹ Eduardo Galeano, *Bocas del tiempo* (Montevideo: Ediciones del Chanchito, 2004), 207. Mark Fried, *Voices of time: A life in Stories*, trans. (Metropolitan Books: NY, 2006), 207.

Quintana Roo. The 2005 Mexican National Census (CONAPO) shows that Playa del Carmen was the fastest growing city in México surpassing northern border cities such as Tijuana by up to 13% in annual growth rates.² Despite the 2008-2009 world financial crisis, the state of Quintana Roo, México is continuing to flourish with jobs. The governor of Quintana Roo, Félix Gonzáles Canto, stated at the *International Tourism Trade Show* (FITUR) in Madrid in late January 2009 that the economic world crisis had led to a reduction of operation in tourist destinations, but this was not the case in the state of Quintana Roo, where tourists (especially Europeans) are continuing to enjoy their vacations to Cancún and the Riviera Maya.³

Even though migration is associated mainly with crossing international boundaries, I argue that Mexican migration is currently taking place at rapid levels within México's national boundaries and that migrants continuously face human rights abuse. My thesis explores the lives of young indigenous⁴ males who are emigrating from Chiapas to Quintana Roo in search of dreams of prosperity that seems to be closer, more accessible, and more familiar than having to migrate far from home. In this thesis, I will examine the dynamics of migration in southern

² Regina Moctezuma, "Playa del Carmen, ciudad que más crece." *CNN Expansión*, 4 May 2007 <http://www.cnnexpansion.com/actualidad/2007/4/playa-del-carmen-ciudad-que-mas-crece> (accessed on 14 March 2009).

³ "Destacan atractivos de Quintana Roo en la Feria Internacional de Turismo," *Hoteles en Cancún*. January 29, 2009, <http://www.hoteles-en-Cancún.com.mx/destacan-atractivos-de-quintana-roo-en-la-feria-internacional-de-turismo.html> (accessed on 3 March, 2009).

⁴ Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, *Así es Chiapas*, <http://www.asieschiapas.gob.mx/>, (accessed January 3, 2009). Chiapas has 979, 614 indigenous people, 12 of the 62 recognized indigenous communities México: *Tzeltal, Tsotsil, Ch'ol, Tojolabal, Zoque, Chuj, Kanjobal, Mam, Jacalteco, Mochó, Cakchiquel and Lacandón or Maya Caribe*. These numbers represent those that speak an indigenous language and do not include those that do not speak the language, those that settle in indigenous communities, and those that reserve partially some aspect of indigenous culture.

México, and through a case study in the Riviera Maya, I will explore through the perspectives of male construction workers from Chiapas, how migrant rights are being violated. Using Chiapaneco⁵ migration to Quintana Roo as a case study, I attempt to answer the following questions. What are the history and the pattern of migration in southern México? Who are these migrant Chiapanecos? Why do they migrate to Quintana Roo? What is the extent to which Chiapanecos are exploited in Quintana Roo and who is responsible? What is the outcome of the policies the Mexican government has put in place to address and protect migrants' rights in México and as a result what should be done?

Literature Review

In order to develop an in-depth understanding of the field of migration studies, it is important to incorporate literature from many disciplines and from transnational perspectives. Using a multidisciplinary approach, I draw from primary and secondary sources, information from the popular press, conferences and organizations, as well as internet sources. I discuss influential scholarly themes that are important in this study, such as México's southern border, the dynamics of migration in Chiapas, and the significance of human rights discourse in migration studies.

While some migration scholars use the term *transnational* communities, Lynn Stephen uses the term *transborder* communities since migration has had a long history that goes back in some places even before nations were fully established in the

⁵ In this thesis, *Chiapaneco* describes the indigenous Maya people from Chiapas and *migrant* describes a person that moves from one place to another, regardless of borders.

region. The local and regional contexts of migration are central factors in just how transborder communities have come to be constituted in the 21st century, particularly because their local histories, cultures, and understandings of migration are important.⁶ In this thesis I discuss how México has always had a history of exchange and interconnection between people, family, and communities along its southern border with Guatemala and Belize.

In the last decade international governments, international organizations, NGOs, and academics have paid significant attention to México's southern border. Multiple authors have begun to look at the transborder dynamics along México's southern border, particularly that with Guatemala. The fluidity in the movement of people across the México-Guatemala border must not be overlooked because of the existence of historical cross-cultural mobility.⁷ Daniel Villafuerte Solís is one of the most influential scholars who have focused on socio-political and economic relationships in southern México. He particularly looks at how globalization has affected México-Central American relationships, particularly how the Plan Puebla Panamá (PPP) has surged from this process.⁸ Villafuerte Solís argues that

⁶ Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives* (Durham: Duke U P, 2007), 314.

⁷ Miguel Ángel Castillo, "The Mexico-Guatemala Border: New Controls on Transborder Migration in Views of Recent Integration Schemes?" *Frontera Norte* 29 (2003): 35-65; Jacobo Dardón, *La frontera de Guatemala con México: aporte para su caracterización*, (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: FLASCO, 2002); Mario Monteforte Toledo, *La frontera móvil*, (México City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997).

⁸ Plan Puebla Panamá (PPP) or the Mesoamerican Integration Development Project is a development project between nine Mexican states, all Central America, and Colombia. Critics argue that this is an attempt to exploit the people and resources of the region in order to attract foreign investors. For discussion, see Daniel Villafuerte Solís, "Frontera sur de México: del TLC México-Centroamérica al plan Puebla-Panamá," (México City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004).

intensification of trade relations between México and Central America, the PPP, and the NAFTA and CAFTA treaties have failed to respond to the development needs of the region. His findings conclude that the United States has only been preoccupied with taking advantage of natural resources, the control of weapons, drugs, and migration and disabling the EZLN.⁹

A number of studies have examined migration within the state of Chiapas. Jorge Ignacio Angulo Barredo and Juan Pedro Viquiera have looked at historical and the economical, social, and political situations that have led to the current migration patterns of Chiapanecos, especially within Chiapas. Angulo Barredo and Viquiera both examine historical migrations of the indigenous populations of Chiapas. However, Angulo Barredo encompasses more of a socio-anthropological interpretation about rural migration and development of Chiapaneco migration in and outside of Chiapas.¹⁰

There have been several prominent scholars who have carried out significant studies regarding current Chiapaneco migration to either the United States or other parts of México. María Eugenia Anguiano Téllez's work is important for analyzing the current situation of migratory movements in Chiapas.¹¹ She assesses the

⁹ Daniel Villafuerte Solís, "The Southern Border of México in the Age of Globalization," in *Borderlands: Comparing Border Security in North America and Europe*, ed. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2007), 346.

¹⁰ Jorge Ignacio Barredo, "De las montañas de Chiapas al Soconusco, la selva, Cancún y ahora a Estados Unidos: las prácticas migratorias de los campesinos indígenas de Chiapas," in *Migraciones en el sur de México y Centroamérica*, ed. Daniel Villafuerte Solís and María del Carmen García Aguilar (Chiapas, México: UNICACH, 2008), 323-342

¹¹ María Eugenia Anguiano Téllez, "Chiapas: territorio de inmigración, emigración y tránsito migratorio," *Papeles de Población* 56 (2008): 215-232.

conditions that exist in Chiapas and argues that it be regarded as a territory of immigrant laborers, as a transit location for migrants coming from Guatemala, and as a sending state of migrants to the United States or other parts of México. Her study uses information from *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (National Institute of Statistics and Geography-INEGI), *Consejo Nacional de Población* (National Council of Population-CONAPO), *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (National Migration Institute-INM), and questionnaires conducted by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Anguiano Téllez argues that Chiapas has not been successful with its economic strategies because despite the efforts it has only managed to exploit natural resources without successfully creating jobs. Therefore, Chiapas is continuing to send migrants to the United States and other parts of México.¹²

María del Carmen García Aguilar and Daniel Villafuerte Solís examine from a macro perspective how and why migration has increased from Chiapas to the United States. They argue that the rural crisis in 1988, the fall of international coffee prices in 1989, and both Hurricane Mitch and the *Ejército Zapatista Liberación Nacional*¹³ (EZLN) uprising has generated a continuous flow of migrants from Chiapas to the United States. They conclude that existing social migration networks that have increased in recent years will continue to keep this flow constant.¹⁴

José Alfredo Jáuregui Díaz and María de Jesús Ávila Sánchez explore some of

¹² Anguiano Téllez, *Chiapas: territorio*, 229.

¹³ The EZLN gained international attention after January, 1994 when the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect.

¹⁴ Daniel Villafuerte Solís and María del Carmen García Aguilar Rural, "Crisis rural y migraciones en Chiapas," *Migración y Desarrollo* (2006): 128.

the important characteristics that have produced migration from Chiapas to the United States. Jáuregui Díaz and Ávila Sánchez present a historical trace of indigenous migration patterns within Chiapas, similar to that of García Aguilar and Villafuerte Solís. Yet, in addition to the struggle for lands, the drop in coffee prices, the rise of the EZLN, natural disasters, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the rise in the age of the working population in Chiapas have also contributed to more people leaving Chiapas.¹⁵ Moreover, Jáuregui Díaz and Ávila Sánchez provide information and statistical information from organizations and surveys such as INEGI, CONAPO, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, corroborating Anguiano Téllez's study. As in García Aguilar and Villafuerte Solís's study, Jáuregui Díaz and Ávila Sánchez conclude that migration will persist because of the migratory networks that have been established. However, they also add that the increase in social capital and the knowledge of how to avoid dangers along the U.S.-México border will contribute to the fostering of migration from Chiapas to the United States.¹⁶

García Aguilar and Villafuerte Solís have cooperated together as editors in a collection of articles that examines the migration movements of people in order to present a thorough and comprehensive account of the migration patterns in Central America and southern México.¹⁷ In 2006 the *Foro Internacional de las Migraciones* (Forum of International Migration) took place in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas. This was

¹⁵ José Alfredo Jáuregui Díaz and María de Jesús Ávila Sánchez, "Estados Unidos, lugar de destino para los migrantes chiapanecos," *Migraciones Internacionales* 4 (2007): 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷ Daniel Villafuerte Solís and María del Carmen García Aguilar, ed., *Migraciones en el sur de México y Centroamérica*, (Chiapas, México: UNICACH, 2008).

the first time an international forum was brought together to discuss the flow of migrants in México's southern region, while focusing on economic and social development, human rights, transborder relations, intercultural relations, and migration security.¹⁸

The literature that exists on Maya migration to the tourist sections of Quintana Roo, such as Cancún, predominately focuses on migrants' connection with their home communities. Scholars, Alicia Re Cruz, María Bianet Castellanos, and Ligia Aurora Sierra Sosa have all analyzed issues regarding Maya migrant experiences such as indigeneity, transnational identities, gender relations, and their experiences in the global economy of Cancún. The ethnic representations of the indigenous Maya people are interrupted because of the socioeconomic practices that exist in such a globalized city such as Cancún.¹⁹ Through ethnographic research, Re Cruz addresses socioeconomic transformations in Yucatec Maya communities and the changes in their ethnic representation by their experiences as migrants in Cancún.²⁰ Castellanos uses ethnography as well to form a case study of the Kuchmil Maya from Yucatán, to discuss indigenous identity and gender ideologies. She argues that it is important to understand how Cancún has affected the indigenous Maya people and also it is just as important to consider how gender, class, and race relationships have changed in these

¹⁸ For discussion, see Miranda Videgaray, Carlos, Ernesto Rodríguez Chávez, and Juan Artola, ed. "Los nuevos rostros de la migración en el mundo," (Government of Chiapas: Tuxtla Gutiérrez, México, 2006).

¹⁹ Aurora Ligia Sierra Sosa, "Mayas Migrantes en Cancún, Quintana Roo," (México City: Plaza y Valdés Editores, 2008).

²⁰ Alicia Re Cruz, *The Two Milpas of Chan Kom: Scenarios of Maya Village Life* (Albany: SUNY P, 1996).

migrant communities.²¹

These works have made significant contributions to scholarship, and have established a basis for more in-depth investigation of the major factors that make southern México a place for migration. However, various literatures on tourism and its effects on the Maya World, as well as works on indigenous migration movements, and studies of migration movements in Chiapas have not provided an in-depth coverage of Chiapaneco Maya migration to the Riviera Maya. With the rapid growth of development across the Riviera Maya, Playa del Carmen has become the fastest growing city in México.²² Therefore, research on the effects of tourism on the Maya people must be extended to other regions in the Riviera Maya beyond Cancún. Although Sierra, Castellanos, and Re Cruz do not necessarily use the phrases of human rights in their research, they do look at issues that human rights scholars put forward when addressing human rights, such as the rights of indigenous people, migrants, and women.

A great deal of the migration literature covers only the protection of international migrants, those that leave their country to settle in another.²³ Consequently, this leaves out the discourse of national migratory flows within

²¹ María Bianet Castellanos, "Adolescent Migration to Cancun: Reconfiguring Maya Households and Gender Relations in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 28 (2007): 1-27.

²² Regina Moctezuma, "Playa del Carmen, ciudad que más crece," CNN Expansión, <http://www.cnnexpansion.com/actualidad/2007/4/playa-del-carmen-ciudad-que-mas-crece> (accessed May 4, 2007).

²³ Amnesty International. "Living in the Shadows: A Primer on the Human Rights of Migrants." 31 August 2006. [Website Online], <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL33/006/2006/en/ff46cebe-d3fd-11dd-8743-d305bea2b2c7/pol330062006en.pdf>, (accessed 5 November 2008). 1-61.

countries—a serious gap in the literature. Regardless of borders, migrant rights are often invisible in both national and international agendas. In addition, human rights scholars, other than International Labor Organization (ILO) officials or former officials, give little attention to workers rights.²⁴ According to Virginia Leary this is likely due to the tendency of most human rights organizations to focus on civil and political rights and to neglect economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to housing, the right to food, and workers' rights.²⁵

Although, some human rights organizations, particularly Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have voiced their concerns about the treatment of migrant workers and worker issues, it has once again mostly been focused on international migrants. The Mexican government has taken some measures to contribute to the discourse of the migration phenomenon along its southern border. For example, the Mexican government has published a report that covers the fluidity in the movement of workers along México's southern borders.²⁶

The report gives various reasons for Central Americans, especially Guatemalans, to migrate to Quintana Roo. Additionally, statistical data is provided on the growth of Quintana Roo, the type and number of workers that are needed for

²⁴ Virginia Leary, "The Paradox of Worker's Rights as Human Rights," *The Paradox of Worker's Rights as Human Rights.* *Human Rights, Labor Rights, and International Trade.* Ed. Lance A. Compa and Stephen F. Diamond (Philadelphia: U of Pen P, 1996), 22-47.

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁶ México, INM, *Centro de Estudios Migratorios*, "Diagnóstico general de los flujos de trabajadores temporales de la frontera sur de México: Resumen de principales hallazgos y tendencias a futuro," (México City: April 2005), <http://www.inm.gob.mx/estudios/avancesdeinvest/trabajadorestemporales.pdf> (accessed November 18, 2007).

the construction of hotels in the region, and the statistical estimates of the growth of migration in the region. The end of the report highlights how labor relations with other countries, such as Guatemala, are crucially important. Hence, the report stresses how México has ratified conventions to protect international workers, such as the *United Nation's International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families* (ICMW) and others related with the ILO, which is significant since in the last decade the Mexican government has been apprehensive of its image of how it treats Central American migrants inside México.

This thesis contributes to the current literature by considering not only migratory movements from Chiapas to Quintana Roo, but considers the significance of the Chiapaneco worker rights as human rights. Furthermore, the working and living conditions of the workers must be understood from the voices of the construction workers themselves in order to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of migration and enforce the rights for indigenous migrant workers in Quintana Roo.

Methodology

The essence of this thesis is based on literature that I have reviewed, as well as the data that I collected during my fieldwork in México during the summer of 2008. I was given the opportunity to travel to México with funding provided by a Tinker Summer Field Grant from the Center of Latin American Studies at the University of Kansas. During the month of July, I stayed with a close friend who lives in northern México City and who also attends the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Estado de

México. Through my friend's contacts and contacts that I had established previously, I was able to collect information and statistical data. I also looked at information reported by Mexican media outlets, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet in order to gain insight into present-day public opinion regarding migration in southern México. I used standardized open and close ended questions in my interviews with university professors, journalists and radio show hosts. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and then transcribed into English.

I carried out my qualitative research in northern Quintana Roo in late July until early August of 2008. First, I met and interviewed journalists in Cancún. Then, I traveled to the towns of Puerto Morelos and Playa del Carmen where I informally interviewed 30 workers. Above all, it was through observation, interviews, and ethnographic accounts of the migrants themselves that I learned to see the paradox of living in the "paradise" that exists in the Riviera Maya.

Specific documentation on Chiapaneco workers' living and working conditions in Quintana Roo have been carried out mainly by journalists and a small number of non-profit organizations. I draw on quantitative information from many of these sources and also from Mexican national census statistics for this project. *Caritas Internationalis*, an international organization that focuses on sustainable development, the *Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas*, and a sustainable tourism organization in Cancún, *Redes Turismo*, have published a study

regarding the situation of Chiapaneco migrants in Quintana Roo.²⁷ In this study 300 surveys were conducted, 150 in Cancún and 150 in Playa del Carmen, along with participant observation in both cities and 20 in-depth interviews with construction managers, contractors and other personnel that work in the hotels in order to understand their vision of the problem. This study is an example of one of the few efforts that are being made to address the need for a *casa de migrante* ‘migrant house’, which would provide support, hospitality, and defend and promote the human rights of migrants in Playa del Carmen.

Subject Positionality

My own background and personal experiences drove me to conduct the research for this study. My parents come from the rustic valleys and mountains of the municipality (township) of Balleza, Chihuahua, México and they migrated to U.S. shortly before I was born. I was born in small Nebraska town and then I moved to another small town in Kansas when I was two. It was my parent’s own experiences of marginalization in Mexican and U.S. societies that pushed me to develop a passion for migrant human rights advocacy. For example, my father’s strong ties to the indigenous Tarahumara and his near death experiences in attempting to cross into the U.S. made me aware of the dignity of human rights at a very young age.

²⁷ A journalist in México City recommend that I contact the director of Redes Turismo in Cancún. Telephone conversation with author on July 24, 2008. Through the director I was introduced to the study, “Problemática de los trabajadores pendulares provenientes de Chiapas a la zona norte del estado de Quintana Roo (2007),” which was used to corroborate and augment my evidence in this thesis.

I consider myself a Mexican-American who was raised with deep Mexican values and traditions. I did not learn English until I entered kindergarten, but with time I had completely become bilingual and bicultural—Spanish at home and English at school. I spent every summer of my childhood with family in México who never had the opportunity to visit the U.S. because of documentation issues, but it was these same family members that taught me the significance that every human being deserves basic human rights.

I looked distinctly different from many of the workers that I interviewed during my field, which some barely spoke Spanish, were short, and dark. Many thought that my own Spanish accent and my looks indicated that I came from a wealthy background (from being raised with a family who comes from northern Mexico). It was not until I shared my own personal stories about my family's immigration history that they were able to relate to me and feel more comfortable with my presence. My family's deep involvement with the indigenous Tarahumara and my sensitivity to migrant human rights helped shape many of my relationships with the workers. Many of my interviewees were then able to understand that I could indeed appreciate and relate to many of their own migrant stories about what it meant to be socio-economically marginalized.

Overview of the Study

This research project concerns intra-regional migration patterns within México, focusing on indigenous Maya workers from Chiapas who left their homes in the impoverished highlands to work along the white Caribbean beaches in the nearby

Mexican state of Quintana Roo, a high-end dollar tourist region now called the Maya Riviera. Specifically, my study examines the everyday lives of Chiapaneco male construction workers there and determines the myriad ways that they suffer human rights violations. *Chapter Two* explores the historical cross-border mobility that has existed in Chiapas since the 19th century, and how Chiapas has developed into a receiving, transit, and sending state of migration. *Chapter Three* discusses the dynamic socio-economic factors that are shaping this migratory movement to Quintana Roo, the significance of migrant construction labor in the area, and the context of this migratory phenomenon from the perspective of various actors and institutions in the region. *Chapter Four* presents the main body of the thesis, a case study of the everyday lives of Chiapaneco male construction workers in Quintana Roo. The case study combines statistical data gathered from NGOs, interview data from the construction workers, and participant observation completed at construction sites and the workers' homes. Data reveals the desperate and deplorable working and living conditions of construction laborers in Quintana Roo, from which I discuss how the migrants are being exploited, marginalized, and abused. Chapter Four ends with a brief assessment of the conditions that have lead to the exploitation of these Maya migrants. *Chapter Five*, the conclusion, provides a review of the case study, where I will discuss what measures and responses the Mexican government has taken to address the exploitation of the workers, and what types of national policies or international laws need to be created or enforced in order to protect the human rights of indigenous and all migrants.

CHAPTER 2-Patterns of Migratory Movements in Southern México

This chapter discusses the historical cross-border mobility that has existed in the state of Chiapas, México since the 19th century. Due to Chiapas' geographic location there remains a fluidity of migration and close kinship between Chiapas and Guatemala despite their shared "border." Chiapas is a state that both sends and receives migrants; it also serves as a transit state for Central American migrants who intend to cross México in order to reach the United States. I provide this historical context in order to illustrate the current migration patterns that exist in México's southern region. I base this information on my own experiences along México's southern border, through research, statistical data, and personal interviews.

I will present an outline of historical migration trends of Central American migrants to México, specifically Guatemalans, traveling as seasonal laborers, civil war refugees, and transit migrants who cross México in order to reach the United States. I will also address how attention to Guatemalan temporary workers in Chiapas and Central American transit migrants has taken center stage, leaving the topic of Chiapas' own emigration largely out of popular academic debate. This will lead into the discussion of how Chiapas has recently emerged as a predominant sending state of migrants, thus laying the groundwork for the presentation of my fieldwork in Chapter 4, which deals with Chiapaneco immigration to the state of Quintana Roo.

History and Geography of México's Southern "Border"

México's southern border measures 1,149 km, and is shown in map 1.

Guatemala and México's shared border measures 959.6 km and that between Belize and México measures 178.4 km.²⁸

Map 1: Map of México



Source: Map Created in ArcGIS using ESRI Data and Maps.

²⁸ Andrea Hernández Fitzner. “Los derechos del migrante en la frontera sur: el fracaso de la política migratoria Mexicana” (Undergraduate Thesis: Universidad de las Américas Puebla, 2007) 15.

Chiapas is the foremost border state for migrant crossings and encompasses 57.8% of the southern border.²⁹ This political boundary crosses the indigenous territories of Maya groups such as the *Choles*, *Mam*, and *Chuj*, and for centuries these people have moved back and forth across México and Guatemala. Colonialism interrupted this world because the boundaries of territories reflected the administrative needs of the conquerors.³⁰ Although Chiapas was considered part of Guatemala, it had never joined the United Provinces of Central America, which had emerged from the collapse of the Spanish colonial authority in 1823. Creoles in the highlands of Chiapas requested annexation to México from the Mexican government, even though a large minority considered themselves Central American.³¹ With the fall of the United Provinces and a major vote in favor in Chiapas, Chiapas became part of México in 1842.³² A treaty was finally signed in 1882 that divided the two nations with the artificial border that exists today.

The México-Belize border has been marked by major historical events, such as the *Guerra de Castas* among Maya groups in Yucatán in the 1840s. The high demand for mahogany and chicle, used to produce chewing gum, shifted the attention of the Mexican Government to Quintana Roo. Porfirio Díaz extended his military and diplomatic tactics to this region in México by signing the Mariscal-Spencer treaty in 1893, establishing the former border with the Rio Hondo between México and

²⁹ For the purpose of this thesis, I will primarily focus on the dynamics of this border.

³⁰ Manuel Ángel Castillo, "México-Guatemala Border: New Controls on Transborder Migrations in View of Recent Integration Schemes?" *Frontera Norte* 15 (2003): 39.

³¹ Jurgen Bucheanu, "Small Numbers Great Impact: México and its Immigrants, 1821-1973," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (2001): 31.

³² Hernández, "Los derechos," 7.

British Honduras. Besides serving as a production state, Quintana Roo served as a penitentiary state. Opponents of the Díaz regime, such as politicians, priests, journalists, labor organizers and peasants were sent to work with Afro-Belizeans on the chicle and mahogany camps where many died of tropical diseases, malnutrition and attacks from resisting Maya.³³ Population boomed in this region as employment opportunities were created by agricultural colonization. Products from the tropical forests, such as chicle, were in high demand during WWI and WWII, resulting in *Wrigley's Company* from Chicago and *Adams Company* from New York installing subsidiaries in México.

By the late 1980s the sugar industry flourished on both sides of the Rio Hondo. Yet, it was the Belizean population that began to migrate into México to work in the sugar industry, but more importantly to work in the booming tourist industry in Cancún.³⁴

México's southern border was not conceptualized in the same way as the northern border, nor was it the center for governmental policies or public attention. This is the reason many have called it the "forgotten border." Due to this lack of attention, people have traveled back and forth to trade and maintain relationships. According to the director of México's Office of the International Organization of Migration, México's southern border is a place that is marked by poverty,

³³ Natalia Armijo Canto, "Dinámica Fronteriza México-Belice: Tema pendiente en la agenda de investigación sobre la frontera sur," in *Migraciones en el sur de México y Centroamérica*, ed. Daniel Villafuerte Solís and María del Carmen García Aguilar (Chiapas, México: UNICACH, 2008), 224.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

marginalization of the poor, and isolation from the rest of the country.³⁵ In addition, México's southern border has been home to many criminal groups, as well as the site of major trafficking in drugs, weapons, and people.

Historically, the flow of Central American migrants into Chiapas can be divided into three specific sections. *First*, economic migrants or temporary laborers came to work in agriculture, domestic, or service jobs in the Soconusco region of Chiapas since the late 19th century. *Second*, Central American refugees from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and particularly those from Guatemala entered México to escape the violence from their countries' civil wars in the late 1970s and 1980s. The *third* and most talked about group consists of those classified as transmigrants. These economic migrants' main objective is to cross México to reach the United States. In addition, Chiapas sent its own migrants to neighboring Mexican states at least since the late 1980's and then in the 1990's to more distant Mexican regions and the United States.

Temporary Workers in Chiapas

Many Guatemalans, especially those from northern Guatemalan highlands, have since the late 19th century regarded the Soconusco region as an area of opportunity to work seasonally on the agricultural plantations.³⁶ Guatemalans settled in high numbers in the lowlands and foothills of the Soconusco where the plantations

³⁵ Interview by author, July 17, 2008, México City.

³⁶ The Soconusco region, the southern most part of Chiapas, is considered the key point linking Central America and North America.

have been essential to the market. The first major movement of Guatemalan migrant and guest workers arrived after 1876 to work in the booming coffee industry, although bananas, sugar cane, and other produce also became popular. The population multiplied in the Soconusco region during the period of 1880-1930, from about 17,000 people in 1880 to over 97,000 in 1930.³⁷ México continued to recruit Guatemalan labor well into the 20th century for their cheap labor on the plantations. While businesses wanted Guatemalans, the state did not and implemented regulations making it difficult for Guatemalans to work in México. It began to require workers to obtain visas that were only available for individuals demonstrating a minimum personal wealth of 10,000 pesos.³⁸ The Mexican government also began patrolling the border and implementing systems of control for the first time. By the late 1970's it was estimated that around 180,000 Guatemalans were working in México, reflecting that laws were not enforced and they did not significantly slow all undocumented entrances for labor migration, which still continues today. During the late 1970s to the early 1990s it became unclear for many scholars to determine whether Central Americans migrants were fleeing to México as refugees or for economic prosperity, making it difficult to separate the two.³⁹ Therefore, in this study

³⁷ Juan Pedro Viqueira, "Indios y ladinos, arraigados y migrantes en Chiapas: un esbozo de historia demográfica de larga duración," in *Migraciones en el sur de México y Centroamérica*, ed. by Daniel Villafuerte Solís and María del Carmen García Aguilar, (Chiapas, México: 2008), 296.

³⁸ Anne Kimball, "The Transit State: A Comparative Analysis of Mexican and Moroccan Immigration Policies," *The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies*: U of California- San Diego, Working Paper 150 (June 2007), <http://www.ccis-ucsd.org/PUBLICATIONS/wrkg150.pdf> (accessed 14 November 2008). 7.

³⁹ For discussion, see Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis," *Latin American Research Review* 26 (1991): 75-110.

I analyze Central American migration to Chiapas not only by recognizing historical and current measures, but also by taking into account political and economic motivations to migrate.

In 1990, 71,253 temporary workers were registered in Chiapas, but by 2003 the number had fallen to 46,318 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Influx of temporary farm workers to Chiapas

Year	Number of workers	Year	Number of workers
1990	71,353	1997	60,783
1991	92,687	1998	49,655
1992	74,165	1999	64,691
1993	78,895	2000	69,036
1994	76,822	2001	42,471
1995	67,737	2002	39,321
1996	66,728	2003	46,318
		2004	41,894
		2005	45,484
		2006	40,244

Source: Migration National Institute, Regional Delegation in Chiapas. Taken from the *Propuesta de Política Migratoria para el Estado de Chiapas*, Data Adapted from Villafuerte, “The Southern Border of México,” 336.

Villafuerte Solís attributes this decline in workers in the last 13 years to two factors. First, the crisis of crashing international coffee prices since 1989, which in some cases resulted in prices that were insufficient to cover the production expenses. As a result, salaries have decreased and the demands for agricultural workers have gone down. Second, the overall deepening of the global crisis in the agricultural sector has affected the Soconusco region as well as other Central American

countries.⁴⁰ This became obvious when Chiapanecos were also leaving Chiapas after the 1988 rural crisis that deepened after the fall of international coffee prices.⁴¹ Due to this crisis, thousands of Maya people from the region, both from Central America and Chiapas, have either left or are heading to the United States or other parts of México for employment opportunities.

Most Guatemalan temporary workers in Chiapas continue to come from the two main regions that border Chiapas: San Marcos and Quetzaltenango. In 1997 México signed a bilateral agreement with the Guatemalan government to create a system of identity cards for migrant workers, the *Forma Migratoria para Visitantes Agrícolas* (FMVA), which regulates migratory status and validates guest worker arrangements for one year. Temporary Workers typically arrive between the months of October and January when coffee is harvested, and others are contracted year-round for permanent crops such as bananas. According to Andrea Hernández Fitzner, “In Chiapas 89.4% of the temporary workers are between 15 and 48 years of age, and 87.8% are male”.⁴² In the southeastern Mexican state of Tabasco, agricultural workers predominately work in sugar cane and banana plantations. Typically they stay less than a month because many work to earn extra cash in order to migrate to

⁴⁰ Daniel Villafuerte Solís, “The Southern Border,” 336.

⁴¹ For accounts of migration due to the fall in coffee prices see Jorge Ignacio Angulo Barredo, “De las montañas de Chiapas al Soconusco,” (Chiapas, México: UNICACH, 2008): 323-342; María Eugenia Auguiano Téllez, “Chiapas: territorio de inmigración, emigración y tránsito migratoria,” *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte* 56 (2008): 215-232; Daniel Villafuerte Solís, and María del Carmen García Aguilar, “Crisis Rural y Migraciones en Chiapas,” *Migración y Desarrollo* (2006): 102-129.

⁴² Andrea Hernández Fitzner, (Hernández became Chiapas’s Secretary for the recently established program for development along its southern border in 2009) e-mail message to author, October 26, 2007.

the United States.⁴³ Most available statistics on migrant agricultural workers are from official records. However, a large percent of migrant workers are not recorded in official records. For example, women and children that often accompany male migrant agriculture workers are not included in these statistics. Typically, Guatemalan migrant workers work under unofficial contracts. Unofficial contracts allow employers to pay migrant workers only about US\$3 a day, rather than paying the official US\$4.21 per day.⁴⁴

In addition to these undocumented workers, many documented, daily commuters, temporary workers, and other visitors also arrive in Mexican border towns of Ciudad Hidalgo or neighboring cities like Tapachula with daily local passes, *Forma Migratoria de Visitantes Locales* (FMVL).⁴⁵ The agricultural sector is not the only job market that attracts Guatemalan workers to México. Many Tapachula migrants work as domestic workers, construction workers, or in other sectors of the informal economy. Pickup trucks stop outside of the *Casa de Migrante* in Tapachula in order to pick up day laborers that are paid about one hundred pesos (about US\$10 dollars) for a ten-hour workday.⁴⁶

⁴³ México, “Diagnóstico general,” April 2005.

⁴⁴ Kimball, 75. Migrants are victims of degradation at the workplace and in terms of their living conditions. They are often deprived of water and food, threatened, physically abused, sexually harassed, killed, and may otherwise experience additional human rights violations. Bribes, intimidations and political pressure ensure that protection agencies, such as the Labor Ministry and Social Security inspectors never reach these farms.

⁴⁵ Hernández, “Los derechos,” 22. FMVL passes allow visitors to enter an area within 30 kilometers of border zone for up to 72 hours. In 2004 the INM reported a total of 1,234,248 documented entries with FMVL passes.

⁴⁶ Kimball, 75. Migrants are victims of degradation at the workplace and in terms of their living conditions. They are often deprived of water and food, threatened, physically abused, sexually harassed, killed, and may otherwise experience additional human rights violations. Bribes,

According to Villafuerte Solís, Central American day migrants, particularly Guatemalans, are replacing Mexican day workers in Chiapas for two primary reasons. One reason is that Chiapaneco laborers are migrating to new development opportunities in other states along the southern border, especially the Cancún tourist industry, and second, the conditions of poverty and conflict in Guatemala have produced a more desperate and malleable workforce.⁴⁷ Not only have Chiapanecos entered the tourism industry in Cancún, but also tens of thousands of undocumented Central American migrants, particularly Guatemalans, work in it as well in the state of Quintana Roo.⁴⁸ Chiapanecos are subjected to similar working and living conditions as those of undocumented migrants in northern Quintana Roo. Academics and journalist are calling the situation in the Quintana Roo the Spanish *Reconquista* (re-conquest) of the Maya, because of the domination of Spanish hotel construction chains and the exploitation of indigenous migrants. It is estimated that there are about 90,000 construction workers in the state of Quintana Roo and about 2,000 have been identified as Guatemalans.⁴⁹ These workers receive minimal or no medical services, work hours that far exceed the eight-hour Mexican labor law, earn depressed wages, experience verbal and labor maltreatments, are exposed to diseases, and are subjected to violence.

intimidations and political pressure ensure that protection agencies, such as the Labor Ministry and Social Security inspectors never reach these farms.

⁴⁷ Villafuerte Solís, "The Southern Border," 335.

⁴⁸ George Grayson, "México's Forgotten Southern Border: Does México practice at home what it preaches abroad?" *Center for Immigration Studies* (July 2002), <http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back702.pdf> (accessed November 18, 2007).

⁴⁹ Gloria Leticia Díaz, "La nueva," 2007

In February 2007, President Felipe Calderon announced to México that he would improve the working conditions for guest workers from Central America and also vowed to make it better for Central Americans traveling through México. However, since becoming México's president in December 2006, Calderon has mainly been preoccupied with combating drug trafficking in México and fighting for Mexican migrants' rights in the United States. The migration dilemma along México's southern border has been overlooked, while there has been only occasional focus on transit migrants in this discourse. Monitoring the flow of temporary migrant workers, and at the same time protecting their rights, is critical for México to maintain bilateral relationships in the region, especially since it has signed international accords such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families, which was ratified in 1999.

However, not much attention has been paid to the recognition and protection of México's own indigenous workers in regions of México other than Chiapas and in the northern states such as Sinaloa, Baja California, and Chihuahua. This could be due in part to the marginalization of the indigenous people in México and the lack of social and legal commitment by the Mexican government. Yet, migrant human rights advocates seem to be focused on protecting international migrants, which is why México has addressed concern for Central American transmigrants to the United States and their own migrants in United States. Consequently, México has downplayed the violation of migrants' rights within México, especially those of indigenous workers.

Migrants as Refugees from Central American Wars to Chiapas

During the 1970s people of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala experienced severe political turmoil, which had major economic and political impacts on the entire Central American region.⁵⁰ From 1974 to 1996, over a quarter of a million people died as a result of civil war violence, and over a million people became internally displaced within the region.⁵¹ The first groups of Central Americans to arrive in México were Nicaraguans fleeing the Nicaraguan Revolution (1979-1990) and the Contra War (1984-1986). However, the largest groups of refugees to enter México were the Guatemalans, who began arriving in 1980 during the Guatemalan Civil War.

For the first time México became the primary country to issue asylum for thousands of people fleeing repressive governments in Central America. While some Mexican citizens expressed solidarity with then refugees, others believed that the flood of refugees would threaten México's national sovereignty.⁵² Furthermore, U.S. supporters of the "domino theory" believed that revolutionary uprisings would spread across the border into México and reach the northern border of México thus destabilizing the area.⁵³ As a result México began distancing itself by deporting 2,000 Guatemalan refugees in 1981 and by 1982, 35,000 Guatemalan refugees had been deported from México. This was in violation of *non-refoulement*, which is a principle

⁵⁰ Castillo, "The México-Guatemala," 40.

⁵¹ Kimball, 60.

⁵² Castillo, "The México-Guatemala," 40.

⁵³ Ibid.

in international law that protects refugees from being returned to places where their lives or freedoms can be threatened.⁵⁴ In July 1980, Mexican President López Portillo established the Mexican Committee for Refugee Assistance (COMAR).⁵⁵ México was soon faced with financial pressures and was forced to reevaluate its position of involvement. In 1981 a cooperative agreement was signed stating that identification programs would be designed and financed with the assistance of the UNHCR but coordinated and channeled through COMAR.⁵⁶ The UNHCR assisted with millions of dollars in aid to Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas and other Central Americans that were located throughout México.

By 1982 the Mexican government had allowed many Central American refugees to stay in Chiapas and dealt with the refugee issue on an ad hoc basis.⁵⁷ México agreed to accept Guatemalans as long as they were approved and registered by COMAR, and remained in government-supervised camps and settlements in Chiapas. Ninety-day renewable visas (FM-8) granted refugee migrants the temporary, non-immigrant status of “border visitor.”⁵⁸ Guatemalans who went past the 150km refugee zone of Chiapas received no official status and forfeited their rights to protection. Among this group, Central Americans who contacted the UNHCR to secure asylum were interviewed and evaluated according to México’s

⁵⁴ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (London: U of California P, 2006), 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 49

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50

⁵⁷ Cassandra Ogren, “Migration and Human Rights on the México-Guatemala Border,” *International Migration* 45(2007), 207.

⁵⁸ García, 50

stricter criteria, but Mexican authorities ultimately made the final determination, and these decisions were highly subjective.

Between 1981 and 1984 many Guatemalans settled into what Mexicans referred to as the “refugee zone” in Chiapas. Between 1981 and 1983, according to the UNHCR, about 200,000 Guatemalans fled to México; only 46,000 were officially registered in Chiapas and assisted by UNHCR.⁵⁹ The word *refugee* did not appear in Mexican law and refugees were referred to as “border visitors” and “agricultural workers.” Therefore refugees had little chance of regularizing their status or becoming permanent residents in México.⁶⁰

The 1994 uprising of the Zapatistas in Chiapas was quickly blamed on the influence of the Central Americans who entered in the 1980s.⁶¹ Sergio Aguayo and Patrice Weiss Fagen argue that “Guatemalans were sent to other Mexican states, such as Quintana Roo and Campeche because the Mexican government feared that the refugees would influence the conflictive social situation in Chiapas and those independent organizations in that state would also be strengthened by the refugees.”⁶²

In response to these circumstances the Mexican government took the precaution of sending half of the Guatemalan refugees to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo in May of 1984. Many of the refugees did not want to move, but a compromise was reached (sometimes by force). About 12,000 Guatemalan refugees

⁵⁹ Castillo, “México: Caught.”

⁶⁰ García, 51.

⁶¹ Ibid., 63.

⁶² Sergio Aguayo and Patrice Weiss Fagen, *Central Americans in Mexico and the United States : unilateral, bilateral, and regional perspectives* (Hemispheric Migration Project, Georgetown U, 1988), 17.

relocated to four settlements in Campeche and over 6,000 to four settlements in Quintana Roo, while 23,000 remained in Chiapas.⁶³

Faced with international pressure, México soon became highly involved in finding solutions for the repatriation of Guatemalans. Between 1993 and 1999, the Mexican government and civil organizations in México, with the help of UNHCR and support from the Guatemalan government, resolved the issue through the voluntary, collective, and organized return of about 43,000 refugees back to Guatemala.⁶⁴

Approximately 22,000 Guatemalans, including children born in México and Guatemala, remained in México. In 1996 roughly 11,000 refugees in Campeche and Quintana Roo were given the opportunity by COMAR and the Mexican government to gain permanent legal status and remain in México. Those that stayed in Chiapas were not granted legal status until 1998 because the regional instability and the Zapatista uprising also delayed the Mexican Government's decision.⁶⁵ Today many of these former refugees hold Mexican citizenship.⁶⁶ Those that stayed have developed relations in both countries and continue to maintain social links on both sides of the border.⁶⁷

⁶³ Deborah L. Billings, "Organizing in Exile: The Reconstruction of Community in the Guatemalan Refugee Camps of Southern Mexico, in *The Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives* James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moore, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple U P, 2000), 75.

⁶⁴ Castillo. "México: Caught."

⁶⁵ Ogren, 208.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 215. In addition, México became signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol in 2001, and has passed laws and created frameworks, entities, procedures for handling asylum applications.

⁶⁷ "This is part of this new, complex emerging state of transborder relationships." Castillo, "The México-Guatemala," 42.

México began to receive significant international attention after the arrival of Central American refugees in the 1980s. In the past decade other Central American migrants have left their homes because of natural disasters, political instabilities, and economic downfalls in search of opportunities elsewhere. The labor market and earnings in México for Central Americans were not high enough in the 1980s for them to settle permanently, so many used México as a transit to continue their journey north to the United States.⁶⁸ Recent trends show that Central American migrants have established routes and networks that have enabled them to continue to migrate in high numbers to the United States and some to México.

Transit Migration

The third migratory group that I discuss in this study is that of the transit migrants from Central America to México. Today's Central American migrants are predominately migrating due to economic reasons alone, while previous Central American migrants were migrating for both economic and political reasons. Many of the social problems that produced war in Central America such as intense poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, have continued to plague countries like Nicaragua into the twenty-first century.⁶⁹ Central American countries generally have done little to transform their economies and almost nothing to change their unequal income distribution.⁷⁰ A regional economic crisis occurred as a result of the failure to

⁶⁸ Castillo, "México: Caught."

⁶⁹ Kimball, 64.

⁷⁰ Castillo, "The Mexico-Guatemala," 43.

integrate the small Central American economies and the conflicts of the 1970s. In addition, there have been countless push and pull factors that influence Central American migratory flows across México's entire southern border. Villafuerte Solís suggests that post-conflict scenarios, structural adjustment policies and free trade agreements, combined with natural disasters like Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the crisis of international coffee prices have all contributed to the influx of Central American migrants to México.⁷¹

Many Central Americans continue to utilize the networks and routes that the refugees of the 1980s established in their migration to the United States. According to Andrea Hernández Fitzner there are a total of twelve formal crossings: eight that exist along the border of Chiapas, two in Tabasco, and two in Quintana Roo; 31 informal illegal crossings (seventeen that are known to be in Chiapas); and over 1,000 pedestrian crossings on México's southern border.⁷² Typically Central American migrants choose to cross into México through the Soconusco region of Chiapas. Today the majority of Central Americans migrating to either México or the United States passes through this fertile plain on the Pacific coast of Chiapas. The Guatemalan and Mexican railroads also meet at Soconusco, and the Pan American highway cuts through the region as well, while the only significant airport along the border is located in Tapachula.⁷³

⁷¹ Villafuerte Solís, "The Southern Border," 336.

⁷² Hernández, "Los derechos," 28.

⁷³ Aguayo and Fagen, *Central Americans*, 6.

One of the most common routes in the Soconusco region and the busiest of crossings along the Guatemala-México border is through the Suchiate River, which separates the towns of Ciudad Hidalgo, México and Tecun Uman, Guatemala. Along the Suchiate River it is common to see immigration and border officials from both countries. Boards perched on truck tires serve as ferries for migrants and locals willing to pay a few pesos to cross the slow moving river.⁷⁴ The Suchiate River is also utilized for countless incidents of informal trade across the border. Goods such as tequila, beans, and toothpaste all make their way across the border from México to be resold in Guatemala. Since gas is cheaper in México and only one gallon can cross legally into Guatemala, porters can make about six dollars a trip transporting Mexican gas to Guatemala.⁷⁵

Just as the U.S. has increased its security measures along the U.S.-México border, the journey across México has become increasingly dangerous and as a consequence the price of contracting human smugglers has increased.⁷⁶ After September 11th, 2001 México has also implemented policies, such as the 2001 *Plan Sur* (South Plan) in order to strengthen vigilance and control of migratory flows along its southern borders. Additionally, Colin Powell and Jorge Castañeda signed the

⁷⁴ George Grayson, "Guarding the South." *Business Mexico* 14 (2004): 47.

⁷⁵ Cynthia Gorney. "México's Other Border." *National Geographic.com*, February 2008, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/02/mexicos-southern-border/cynthia-gorney-text> (accessed 18 November 2008).

⁷⁶ Kimball, 88.

agreement *Smart Borders* in 2005, which was designed as President Bush suggested, “To weed out terrorists, while facilitating legal commerce.”⁷⁷

Due to heightened security measures by the Mexican government, migrants are using modes of transportation other than buses. *Polleros* (human smugglers) are charging much more because of the danger involved in migrants crossing the southern border.⁷⁸ Also, the risk of apprehension and robbery by the Mexican migration authorities and transnational gangs exists in the region. Although migrants use various routes and techniques to avoid apprehension, it is often impossible to evade the obstacles encountered in the journey across México to reach the northern border.

Even though most Mexican border and police officials comply with the law, some take advantage of migrants by taking the little cash migrants carry with them. They sometimes exploit women, and/or physically or mentally abuse migrants, and participate in the black market. Border officials sometimes accept very small bribes to allow a person to take prohibited drugs, weapons, stolen automobiles, prostitutes, exotic animals or archeological artifacts over the border.⁷⁹

In addition to being robbed or blackmailed by Mexican officials, migrants may encounter an even more dangerous group that has become a sweeping phenomenon not only along the México-Guatemala border, but throughout most of northern Central America, inside México, the United States, and Canada: the transnational gangs *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Mara 18* (M-18). Gang activities

⁷⁷ Villafuerte Solís, “The Southern Border.” 324.

⁷⁸ About five years ago it cost \$6,000 for an undocumented to travel from Tapachula to the U.S., but now it costs a minimum of about \$8,000.

⁷⁹ Grayson, “Guarding,” 47.

range from various serious criminal actions such as trafficking of weapons and drugs and vehicle theft, to armed robberies and homicides. These gangs are highly visible along the México-Guatemala border where they are known to take pride in being migrant hunters.⁸⁰

The *Maras* have a strong presence in the Soconusco region of Chiapas where they appear in twenty-one municipalities throughout the state. Yet, they are particularly centered in the city of Tapachula. Many of these Maras wait for migrants to cross the Suchiate River or arrive at the railroad tracks, or they simply jump onto moving trains to attack migrants. As previously noted, *Maras* are not the only ones to blame for human rights abuses against migrants, as 65 percent of the violence is caused by the police.⁸¹

Central American women and children are the most vulnerable during the migration journey. Many are not prepared for the physical exhaustion, extortion, or violence that migrants face in the journey northward. México's National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración-INM) estimates that 20 percent of transit migrants are women.⁸² Chiapas has the second highest murder rate after the Mexican northern state of Chihuahua. In 2004 about 400 women were violently murdered, ten

⁸⁰ For discussion, see Villafuerte Solís, "The Southern Border," 333.

⁸¹ *Asalto al sueño*. DVD. Directed by Uli Stelzner, 2006. Germany/Guatemala: ISKA Production, 2007.

⁸² Gabriela Diaz and Gretchen Kuhner, "Women Migrants in Transit and Detention in México," *Migration Information Source*. March 2007, Migration Policy Institute. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=586>, (accessed 8 November 2008).

times higher than Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.⁸³ According to one report, many murdered bodies of women have been found exhibiting the marking “MST” or just “S” carved somewhere on the body as an insignia for *Mara Salvatrucha*.⁸⁴ Violence against women who cross is so well known that many women inject contraceptives before their journey knowing that they will be subjected to rape.⁸⁵

Many women, after being robbed of the money needed to travel north, engage in prostitution in México’s southern border to make up for the lost money and reattempt their journey to the United States. The border reality for women is grim and unique. Some 70 percent of Central American women migrants in the state of Chiapas suffer some sort of violence and 60 percent of them suffer sexual abuse during the migration process. Seventy-six percent of the prostitutes in Chiapas are temporary migrant women originally from Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, 93 percent are undocumented and are between the ages of 19-27. Eighty percent of prostitutes have children below 12 years of age in their home countries. A majority of these women were abandoned by their husbands or have fled abusive relationships.⁸⁶

⁸³ Mercedes Olivera, “Violencia Femecida: Violence Against Women and México’s Structural Crisis,” *Latin American Perspective* 33 (2006), 112.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Diaz and Kuhner, “Women Migrants.”

⁸⁶ Hernández, “Los derechos,” 32-33.

Increase in child migration is driven primarily by the desire to reunite with family.⁸⁷ The increase in the number of Central American migrant parents in the United States has forced many parents to leave their children behind with family members in their countries of origin. When a parent's economic situation stabilizes in the U.S., he or she will contract a *pollero* to bring the child, sometimes as young as ages four and five, from places like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Most of the child migrants are teenage boys who travel without *polleros*. There is a rapidly growing population of undocumented children crossing into México from Central America, a significant increase from 3,000 cases in 2004 to over 5,000 in 2006. Between January and May of 2007, there had already been 4,577 cases reported in Tapachula.⁸⁸

Many migrants prefer to ride Mexican freight trains to avoid the checkpoints encountered on buses heading north. Others are robbed immediately once they enter México, and they are forced to take the free but hazardous ride on the *tren de muerte* or *la bestia*. Migrants wait until nighttime to board the freight trains in Tapachula or Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, which takes them to México's northern border. Besides the *tren de muerte* the ocean is also a dangerous path many Central America migrants choose to travel to the U.S. Once migrants cross into México, clandestine boats take them from Oaxaca to La Paz or San Carlos, Baja California Sur and then on to Tijuana. On September 16, 2007 a small boat was found off the coastal shores of the

⁸⁷ Sara Millar Llana, "In Central America, Child Migrants Now Face Perils Alone," (August 3, 2007) *Christian Science Monitor.com* <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0803/p06s02-woam.html> (accessed November 14, 2008).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Pacific state of Oaxaca that had been carrying 25 migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Peru. Fifteen dead bodies were found washed up on shore, there were three survivors, and seven were reported missing.⁸⁹ This is just one of the rarely reported cases of the treacherous journey through México in order to reach the United States. Even though many migrants are robbed, raped, abused, maimed, or die along the way, many repeat the struggle to attempt to reach the United States. “I’d rather die in the journey, than die in my country of hunger,” commented a Honduran man during one of my visits to the border town of La Mesilla.⁹⁰

Villafuerte Solís suggests that crossings such as that of El Ceibo, Tabasco will become more important in the future for migrants, because the crossings in Chiapas are becoming more patrolled.⁹¹ Although along the border between Quintana Roo, México, and Belize, fewer abuses against migrants have been reported, recent trends have shown a significant increase in the flow of humans, drugs, and goods trafficked across the Belize and México border as well. Natalia Armijo Canto believes a long history of this exists, but it is only in recent years that the dynamics are beginning to show. Armijo states that México’s entire southern border is continually under construction, like a process that has two faces that demands the effort of a transborder vision, especially considering the facts and history that have existed on both sides of

⁸⁹ Gonzalo Egremy and Jesús Henríquez, “Inicia exhumación víctimas naufragio.” *La Prensa Grafica*, El Salvador. March 27, 2008. <http://www.laprensagrafica.net/dpt15/noticias/27032208/1021411.asp>, (accessed November 8, 2008).

⁹⁰ Personal trip by author to La Mesilla, Chiapas in November 2006. This man approached me to offer me currency exchange and I noticed from his accent that he was not Mexican or Guatemalan.

⁹¹ Villafuerte Solís, “The Southern Border,” 321.

the Rio Hondo (Quintana Roo-Belize border), Rio Suchiate (Chiapas-Guatemala border), and Rio Usumacinta (Chiapas-Guatemala border).⁹²

When immigration reform seemed likely during the early days of the Bush administration, Mexican President Fox stressed México's commitment to control the flow of migrants over its southern border to show that México was serious about enforcement.⁹³ Soon the Mexican Government engaged in immigration controls by utilizing military and police agents along the southern border. This policy resembled U.S. immigration policy and provoked a negative reaction, thus the Mexican government withdrew from this strategy and opted a new tactic: internal controls.⁹⁴

México has significantly increased its number of undocumented arrests, thus reaffirming its interest to stop these migrants from reaching the United States. In 2004, 93.5 percent of the 215,695 arrestees of undocumented migrants were mostly from Guatemala (94,404), Honduras (72,840), and El Salvador (34,572).⁹⁵ In 2007, México deported 679,345 migrants to their Central American states of origin. The majority continued to be from Guatemala. México has tremendously enhanced its security measures and the pressure from the United States guarantees that México will continue that policy. There have been many instances where the U.S. has given aid to México to deport Central Americans from México, but according to an article in *International Migration*, México has been unwilling to admit that it is a recipient

⁹² Armijo, "Dinámica," 222.

⁹³ Ogren, 210.

⁹⁴ Kimball, 86.

⁹⁵ Villafuerte Solís, "The Southern Border," 338.

of U.S. aid.⁹⁶ Since 2001, the U.S. has supported a program that buses Salvadorans and Hondurans across Guatemala to the border of their countries. The U.S. also provides inflatable Zodiac boats to patrol rivers found in these regions. George Grayson states that the program makes financial sense for the United States: “while it costs the U.S. \$1,700 to repatriate a Central American apprehended in the U.S., it costs only \$22 to repatriate them from México.”⁹⁷

Between 2002 and 2006, seven new detention centers were created in México, totaling 52 nationwide. Over ten more are currently in the planning stages. By implementing internal control mechanisms, México has reaffirmed its interests in stopping unauthorized migration from reaching its northern border.⁹⁸ Therefore, it has been significantly important for the Mexican government to create and enforce these prisons for undocumented migrants detained in México.

The Mexican government is attempting to improve its detention centers after Gabriela Rodriguez Pizarro, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Migrants’ Rights, visited México in 2002 and reported countless human rights abuses against migrants.⁹⁹ In addition, there is a limited staff and insufficient resources for the overcrowded and unsanitary centers. The INM also restricts the access of NGOs in its facilities, often denying migrants the opportunity to receive assistance. Since the late 1980s, when they assisted Central American refugees, the Mexican Catholic Diocese and NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch continue

⁹⁶ Ogren, 211.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Kimball, 86.

⁹⁹ Ogren, 223.

to be important actors in bringing international attention to México's immigration issue. The detention center in Tapachula was remodeled in April 2006 to hold 1,450 migrants and reportedly cost about US\$9 million dollars.¹⁰⁰ It will take a lot of money, time, and cooperation among officials to improve situations in other detention stations.

México's southern border has a much weaker security surveillance system than the northern border, and is surrounded by weak institutions, corruption, and violence. Since the creation of the México-Guatemala border, the city of Tapachula, Chiapas has become a border town that many refer to as *Little Tijuana*. Similar to Tijuana on the U.S.-México border, Tapachula includes brothels, gangs, drugs, and violence. Rodríguez Pizarro stated, "México is one of the countries where illegal immigrants are highly vulnerable to human rights violations and become victims of degrading sexual exploitation and slavery-like practices."¹⁰¹

Chiapas's Own Migrants

Since the beginning of the 20th century the indigenous population of Chiapas has experienced five notable phases of migratory movements.¹⁰² *First*, migration from the Los Altos region of Chiapas to the coffee plantations of the Soconusco; *second*, migration to the Chiapaneco jungle; *third* rapid migration to major cities in the state; *fourth*, migration to neighboring states, such as Tabasco; and *lastly*, and most currently, migration to northern Mexican states and the United States. I will

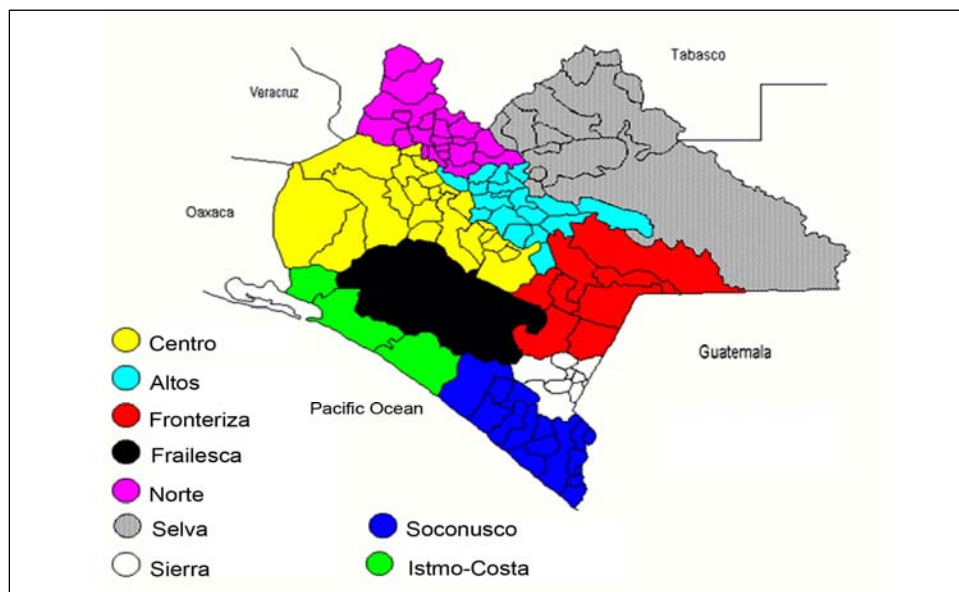
¹⁰⁰ Díaz and Kuhner, "Women migrants."

¹⁰¹ Grayson, "Guarding," 49.

¹⁰² Angulo Barredo, 324.

illustrate how the current in-migration to other neighboring states, such as Quintana Roo, has been overlooked in the discourse and must be taken into account. I will also address how capitalist developments in the state of Quintana Roo are at the forefront of the Mexican government agenda and how this relates to the myriad ways in which indigenous Chiapaneco men are suffering human rights violations in the Riviera Maya.

Map 2: Regions of Chiapas



Source: Gobierno del estado de Chiapas Comité Técnico Especializado de Información Estadística y Geográfica (CTEIEG) INEGI, Marco Geostadístico Nacional 2005. Data Adapted from Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, <http://www.chiapas.gob.mx/mapas/>

The *first* movement began with indigenous migration from the zone of Los Altos, particularly Tzeltales and Tzotziles, to the coffee plantations of the Soconusco. These migrant waves became distinct at the end of the 19th century when coffee

began to be exported from México. About 20,000 indigenous workers from Los Altos were recruited to Soconusco by *enganchadores* (indentured labor recruiters) who were responsible for contracting and bringing them, often by foot, to the plantations. This often led to debt bondage that the indigenous people could never repay. However, in 1936 the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de las Fincas Cafeteleras*, (Workers Union of the Coffee Plantations) started by the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency, established minimum wage salaries, cancellation of debt bondages and enforcement of regulations protecting worker's rights. Although the formal *enganchador* was erased, union leaders along with the government colluded together to maintain the status quo and the *modus operandi*. While the demand of labor in the Soconusco grew, the demand for Los Altos workers was decreased because of the rise in wages and the pressure from the Mexican government to hire legal Guatemalan workers through an agreement that was reached by both governments in 1953.¹⁰³

The *second* stage of indigenous migration occurred between 1940 and 1970 when workers from the Los Altos region shifted their migration focus away from the Soconusco, and began migrating to the jungle region of Chiapas Selva Lacandona. Although some had previously migrated to this area because of extraction of lumber and chicle, it was during this time period of the López Portillo administration that México became increasingly interested in augmenting trade and industrializing. All around México, rural populations had begun to migrate to cities that were industrializing. In Chiapas, there were roads and pathways connecting locations in

¹⁰³ Angulo Barredo, 325.

the jungles to surrounding cities, such as Ocosingo, Altamirano, Las Margaritas, and Comitán that had been built by lumber companies, Pemex (México's state-owned petroleum company), and by some extent, the government.¹⁰⁴

Hydraulic power became a valuable energy source for the Mexican government. Chiapas became home to some of the largest hydroelectric plants in the nation, such as the *Angostura* and *Chiocacán*. In addition, the land of indigenous peoples, such as the *Tzotziles* and *Tzeltales*, was expropriated by the state. Many of the indigenous people who lost their land began to settle in these areas near the Selva Lacandona. This is what many have referred to as the colonization of the people's land of Chiapas, especially the Tsotzil and Tzeltal speaking populations of Los Altos. As a result, these people began to organize politically and economically in order to survive.

The distinct rural-urban migration within Chiapas became noticeable in the early 1970s, marking the *third* migratory phase. This third phase was due to the social and economic changes that were affecting the indigenous population, such as exploitation of their lands, the inability to cultivate their crops, as well as a growing population. Religious persecution was another notable factor as it occurred in the indigenous communities of Los Altos.¹⁰⁵ Particularly, the Chamulas arrived in San Cristóbal in search of work, because they had been driven out of their communities because of religious and political problems.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 327.

¹⁰⁵ Angulo Barredo, 330.

For the first time in history San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas became a major destination for indigenous migrants. Today, 45 of the present neighborhoods in San Cristóbal de las Casas were established by two types of significant movements: the first due to the expulsions from Chamula that occurred in 1974, the other because of the uprising of the Zapatistas in 1994. A third of the population pertains to the first movement and the rest to the second.¹⁰⁶ In both movements there was a presence of either some organization or some moral indigenous leader participating as the systematic head. In the first movement of 1974, incorporation into the labor market was done more at the individual level, such as in domestic service, construction, and the selling of handcrafts. The migration movement of 1994 was based more on activities within organizations, particularly development groups. Groups organized in public transportation, the market, and the major tourist markets located in the southeast part of the city.

In the *fourth* migration phase, Indigenous Maya Chiapanecos began notably migrating for the first time outside of the state in the mid 1970s, mostly to other surrounding southeastern Mexican states. The indigenous Zoque, Chol, and Tzeltal men in the northern part of the state had developed a network of migration to states such as Tabasco and Veracruz where they worked in the petroleum boom and the tourist industry that had begun developing in the Yucatán. The increased extraction of petroleum and the rapid growth of cities provided an array of jobs not only associated with petroleum, but also in construction and janitorial services of the cities.

¹⁰⁶ Angulo Barredo, 331.

Yet, these jobs were traditionally set aside for local residents. The janitorial and construction jobs were given to non-state residents, such as Chiapanecos and Central Americans.¹⁰⁷ Migration to Cancún began in the 1970s and has stayed constant in order to meet the labor demands. The latter example will be further analyzed in the following chapter.

The *last* and most recent migratory movement that has captured the attention from both the Mexican and U.S. governments has been migration from Chiapas to northern Mexican states and to the United States. The economic crisis in the region, natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and Stan in 2005, the decline in coffee prices, the rise in the working age population, and the current lack of economic and social development in Chiapas have all contributed to this recent age of Chiapaneco migration.

Chiapas is a rather new state to send immigrants abroad in comparison to other Mexican states. The earliest recorded migration to the United States from Chiapas was recorded during the first stages of the coffee crisis in the late 1980s, but did not become evident until the mid 1990s.¹⁰⁸ Given that there is no more land to distribute in Chiapas, many young peasant men in Chiapas must work their father's plot of land and once the father passes away they more than likely will have to split the inheritance of the land among other brothers.¹⁰⁹ This makes immigration attractive because of the scarcity of land. Moreover there has been a tremendous

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 334.

¹⁰⁸ Angulo Barredo, 339.

¹⁰⁹ Viquiera, 308

increase in the working age population of Chiapas. The working age of 15-59 years of age increased from 750,000 in 1970 to 2.3 million in 2005.

As previously stated, the Pacific coast and the Sierra Madre of Chiapas were among the former higher recipients of migrants. Today, however, they lag behind in industrialization compared to other parts of Chiapas, and also Hurricane Mitch in 1998 caused significant damage to the areas. These two regions are now recognized as the highest senders of immigrants from Chiapas to the United States.¹¹⁰

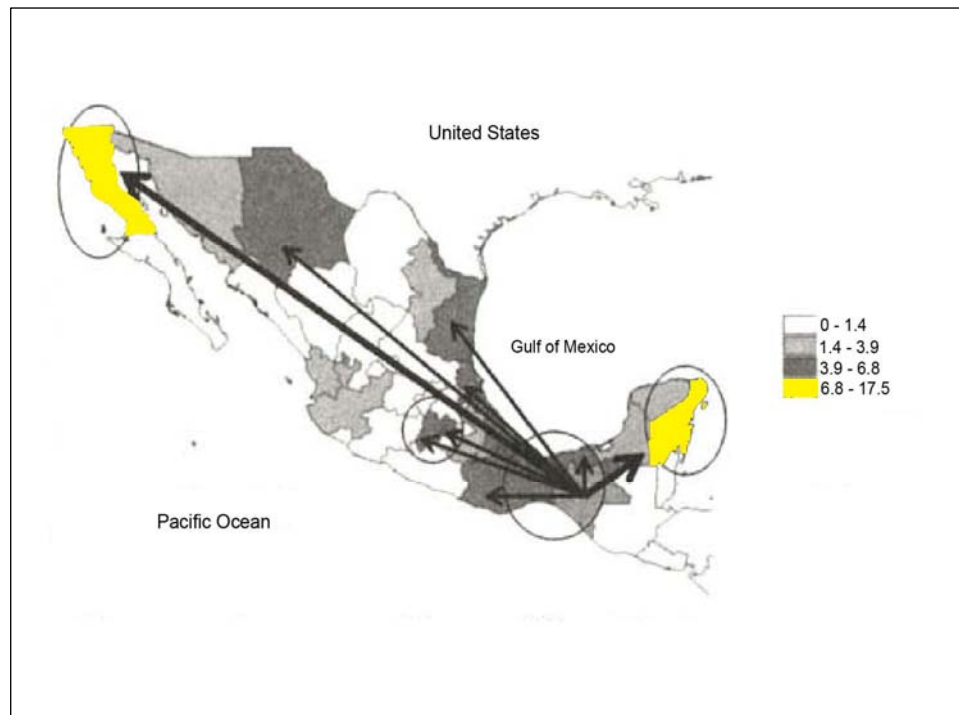
Chiapaneco migration to former popular Mexican states such as Estado de México, Tabasco, Veracruz, and the México City district has decreased, aside from Quintana Roo, which this study further explores. Recent population studies show that almost 90,000 migrants have left Chiapas to other Mexican states, particularly Baja California and Quintana Roo and the United States.¹¹¹

Migration to Baja California, México's northernmost state should be no surprise to those that look at migration, because of its geographic proximity to the United States. Current job losses in Tijuana, heightened U.S. immigration security along the U.S-México border and raids in the U.S., and culture-geographic differences have been influential factors for many Chiapanecos to choose Quintana Roo rather than to travel further north (see Map 3 for percent distribution).

¹¹⁰ Viquiera, 301.

¹¹¹ For discussion, see Angulo Barredo, Anguiano Téllez, Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar, Díaz Jáuregui and Ávila Sánchez.

Map 3: Migration from Chiapas to other Mexican States



Source: Censo de Población y Vivienda 2005 (INEGI)-Consejo Estatal de Población, Chiapas and Data Adapted from Díaz Jáuregui and Ávila Sánchez, 19.

Tijuana lost 15,000 jobs in just one month from October to November in 2008, mostly in the *maquiladora* (factory) industry, which has been affected by the U.S. automotive financial decline. Juárez maquiladoras also cut about 20,000 jobs in 2008.¹¹² Moreover, United States border enforcements reported 50,777 Chiapanecos had been returned to México from 2002-2003.¹¹³ In fact, statistics show that Chiapanecos are also known to be the most vulnerable flow of Mexican migrant

¹¹² “Maquilas Feel Pinch: 20,000 Jobs Lost in Juárez,” (November 2008) *Global Auto Industry.com* <http://www.globalautoindustry.com/article.php?id=3211&jaar=2008&maand=11&target=Latin> (accessed January 3, 2009).

¹¹³ Díaz Jáuregui and Ávila Sánchez, 25.

returnees from the United States. For example, many must search for loans in order to fund their trips, countless are migrating to the U.S. for the first time, and various Chiapanecos lack the experience in international migration.¹¹⁴ Above all, because of heightened security along the U.S.-México border, countless Chiapanecos are faced with danger.¹¹⁵ “Chiapanecos are known to use the rural deserts of the Sonora-Arizona border, where many have been taken advantage by coyotes,” states a representative from the Mexican consulate in Tucson Arizona. “From August 2005 to September 2006, with the help of a migrant NGO, the state government of Chiapas returned 38 bodies of which 40% of these were found in Arizona.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, over half of the Chiapaneco migrants that have reached the United States do not come from the highly marginalized regions of Chiapas. A majority of the migrants that have reached the United States are from the Soconusco and the Centro regions of Chiapas. Migration studies have determined that in order to migrate to the United States it is important to have the necessary financial resources or at least a family member or some other social network. Consequently, what happens to those that live in the most marginalized regions of Chiapas and do not have the financial resources or the migratory networks to assist them to the United States?

While Chiapas contains 95% of México’s natural resources, it ranks among the least developed states in México; production levels of manufacturing, maize and

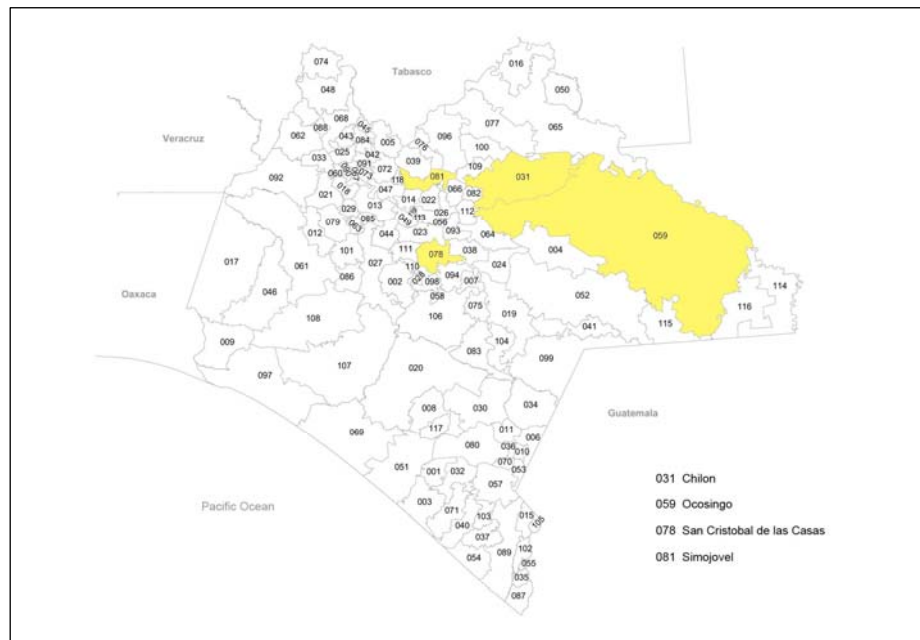
¹¹⁴ Díaz Jáuregui and Ávila Sánchez, 26.

¹¹⁵ The U.S. has heightened its security measures in areas where people were crossing more frequently, such as the El Paso and Tijuana borders. Consequently, this has forced many migrants to use dangerous dessert routes that have less surveillance, such as the deadly Arizona-México border.

¹¹⁶ Díaz Jáuregui and Ávila Sánchez, 26.

coffee are among the lowest in the country. In addition, per capita income gains are the lowest in this region of México. Consequently, a majority of the population, largely indigenous, is unemployed and lives below the poverty line. The marginalization of the Chiapaneco population, economic struggles, and the political and social unrest have been significant factors forcing Chiapanecos to look elsewhere in México for better opportunities. The northern municipalities of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Simojovel, Ocosingo, and Chilón have held significant migration ties to the state of Quintana Roo.

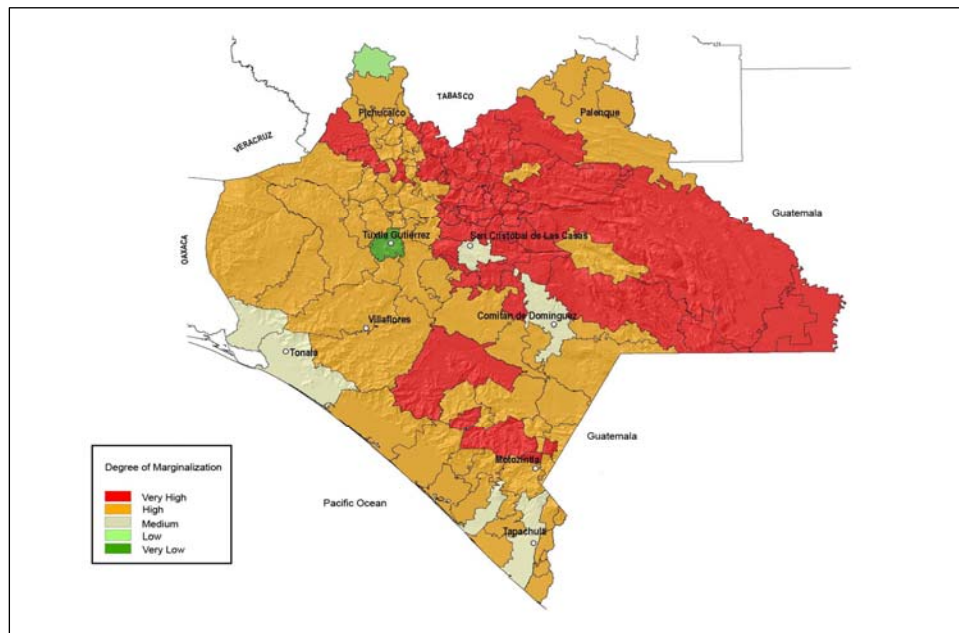
Map 4: Municipalities in Chiapas



Source: Gobierno del estado de Chiapas Comité Técnico Especializado de Información Estadística y Geográfica (CTEIEG) INEGI, Marco Geostadístico Nacional 2005, Data Adapted from Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, <http://www.chiapas.gob.mx/mapas/>

According to map 5, these municipalities fall among the most marginalized regions of Chiapas, which is home to indigenous speaking population of Tzeltal, Tsotsil, Tojolabal, Ch'ol, and Zoque.

Map 5: Degree of Marginalization in Chiapas



Source: Gobierno del estado de Chiapas Comité Técnico Especializado de Información Estadística y Geográfica (CTEIEG), Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), 2005, Data Adapted from Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, <http://www.chiapas.gob.mx/mapas/>

Paradoxically, this is the same region where thousands of indigenous Maya covered their faces, changed their names, called themselves the EZLN, and spoke out against global capitalism on January 1, 1994. Today many indigenous people from these communities, mostly young men, are leaving their impoverished communities

to work in poor precarious construction jobs in the high-dollar capitalist region—the *Riviera Maya*.

Nevertheless, northern Quintana Roo must be analyzed by looking at migration from Chiapas. Migratory networks between the Riviera Maya and Chiapas serve as important determinant factors to drive Chiapanecos to Quintana Roo. The municipal governments of the northern states of Quintana Roo have taken initiatives to prevent clandestine buses from arriving with workers from Chiapas by checking for permits and insurances, but this has done very little to prohibit the arrival of Chiapanecos to the Riviera Maya. Numerous buses have been reported recruiting workers in San Cristóbal de las Casas, especially after Hurricane Wilma in 2005, when cheap and temporary labor was in demand. Participants of Chiapaneco migration to the Riviera Maya are typically young indigenous peasant males, between the ages of 15-34 years, the majority of whom are married and with children back in Chiapas.¹¹⁷ When comparing this to other migration patterns in Mexico, such as Michoacanos who have been migrating to the United States since the late 20th century, the Chiapaneco migration phenomenon proves to be quite contemporary. Young Chiapaneco men are beginning to mark this migratory circuit to the Riviera Maya. It will be interesting to see how their sending communities will change, as well as the receiving society in Quintana Roo.

Historically there has been significant emphasis on the US-México border, causing México's southern border to be overlooked. However, México's

¹¹⁷ "Problemática," 39.

southernmost state, Chiapas, has had a long and continuous history involving an interesting cross-border dynamic in people. While the movement of migrants from Chiapas to the United States has started to become more recognized in the past decade, Chiapaneco emigration to other Mexican states has been for the most part overlooked. Quintana Roo is among the top Mexican states to receive migrants looking for economic opportunities in the prosperous tourist industry of the Riviera Maya. Therefore, in the following chapter I will provide an understanding of how northern Quintana Roo has been shaped into a migrant receiving region and how it is continuously driving Chiapanecos to this thriving tourist state. Furthermore, the socio-economic forces that shape the Riviera Maya have an extreme effect on the inhuman conditions these workers experience. For this reason, an examination of some of the personal stories of Chiapaneco construction workers in Quintana Roo, México, will illustrate not only the human rights violations occurring every day, but also provide a sense of the humanity that is being taken for granted in this region.

CHAPTER 3-Behind the Glitz of México's Riviera Maya

Explosive growth of the hotel construction and tourist industry in México's Yucatán over the past thirty years has not only been positive, but it has exacerbated the poor living and working conditions for thousands of migrants in the region. Specifically, Maya migrants from Chiapas or Guatemala are subject to discrimination and subordination by other migrants, employers, and police officials. Their lives are extremely affected by the poor legal protection in México, forcing them into undignified and undeserving squalid living and working conditions in the Riviera Maya.

In this chapter, first I analyze the economic and social factors that have helped develop the Mexican state of Quintana Roo and the factors that have contributed to its thriving economy and development. Secondly, I will focus on migrant workers and the high demand for supply of these workers for construction and expansion of this region. Finally, I will discuss who the majority of the construction workers are in the Riviera Maya, and also I will explain some of the working and living conditions that they encounter. This will lead into Chapter 4 that includes ethnographic field data regarding the workers' exploitative experiences.

The Development of Quintana Roo

After petroleum revenues and migrant remittances, tourism is the third largest source of foreign currency receipts in México, providing over 8 billion dollars of

income in 2000.¹¹⁸ Despite the loss of world market shares during the 1990s, tourism demand and supply increased faster in México than in most other developing countries.¹¹⁹ México has attracted the most foreign tourists and foreign currency of any other country in the Third World.¹²⁰ In 2000 México received 20.6 million international tourists as a result of state-sponsored tourism development.¹²¹ Additionally, enclave-like tourism-related infrastructure in peripheral locations has attracted national and foreign investors in México.¹²² The increase in hotel productions across México's tourist regions has caused significant rates of migration. According to Wilson the Mexican government had focused on diverting internal migration towards tourist development areas. This is mainly true for México's youngest state Quintana Roo, where the majority of the population has been born outside of the state.

Often times, Cancún is associated with México's Yucatán by international tourists. Although Cancún is located in the Yucatán Peninsula, it is geographically situated in the state of Quintana Roo. The area of the Yucatán where Quintana Roo exists today was never primary for the Spanish to colonize because it was regarded as inhabitable, barbarous, and inhospitable and did not seem to have resources worth

¹¹⁸ David Barton Bray, Skya Rose Murphy, and Melissa Cornejo, "Beyond Islands? Sustainable Rural Development in Mexico," in *Changing Structure of Mexico*, ed. Laura Randall (Armonk, NY: M.E Sharpe, 2006), 336.

¹¹⁹ Ludger Brenner and Adrián Guillermo Aguilar, "Luxury Tourism and Regional Economic Development in México," *The Professional Geographer* 56 (2002): 500.

¹²⁰ Tamar Diana Wilson, "Economic and Social Impacts of Tourism in Mexico," *Latin American Perspectives* 35 (2008): 38.

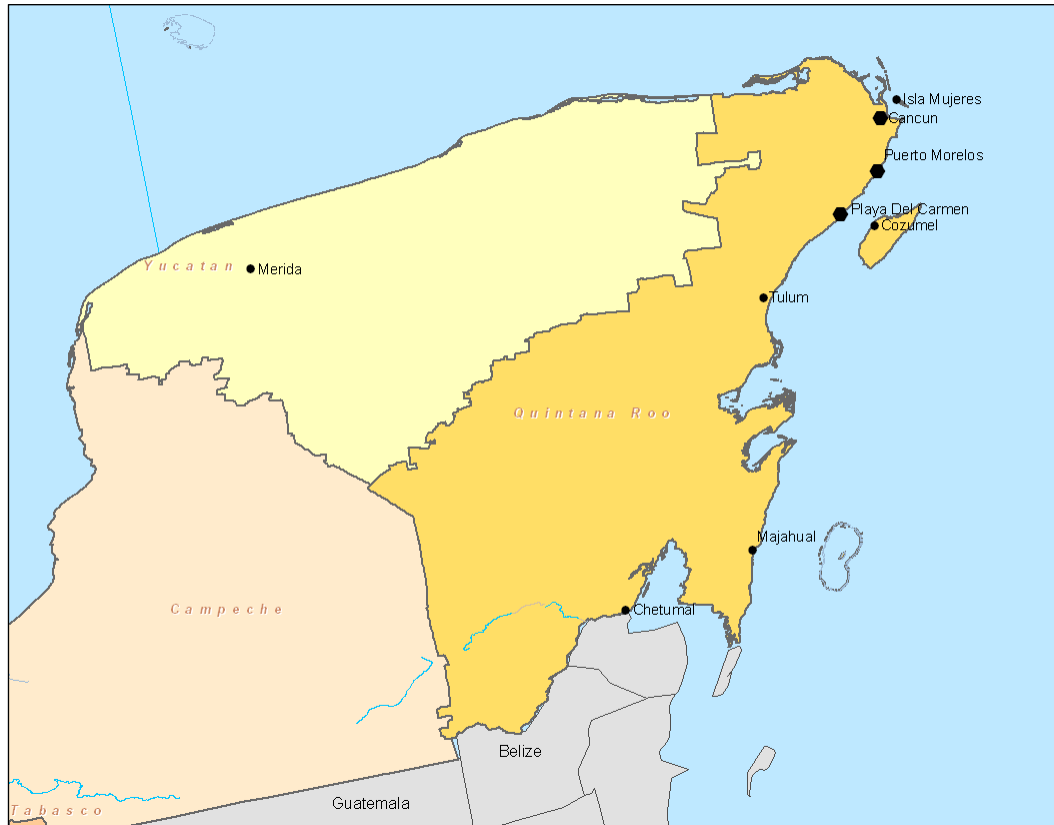
¹²¹ Ludger Brenner, "State Planned Tourism Destinations: The Case of Huatulco, Mexico," *Tourism Geographies* 7 (2005): 144.

¹²² Rebecca María Torres and Janet D. Momsen, "Gringolandia: The Construction of a New Tourist Space in Mexico," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (2005): 326.

fighting for. Throughout its history, Quintana Roo has been shaped as a magnet for refugees, first for Indians fleeing Spanish control, then as a haven of independence for those Maya villagers opposing Mexican rule, and later for those Maya that were fleeing the Caste War in the 1840s. In the early 20th Century the Mexican government began to take notice of the area, and consequently President Porfirio Díaz made it a territory in 1902 and named it after the loyalist Mexican politician Andrés Quintana Roo. By 1915 Quintana Roo had shifted back to the control of the state of Yucatán and then in 1931 it separated again. Finally, in 1974 Quintana Roo was officially declared a state, but remained sparsely populated. The total population of Quintana Roo was 26,967 and then increased to 50,169 when tourism began to unfold in the early 1960s.¹²³

¹²³ Oriel Pi-Sunyer, R. Broke Thomas, and Magalí Daltabuit, *Tourism and Maya Society in Quintana Roo, México*, Latin American Studies Consortium of New England. (Storrs, CT: U of Connecticut, 1999),5.

Map 6: The State of Quintana Roo and México's Yucatan Peninsula



Source: Map Created in ArcGIS using ESRI Data and Maps.

Cancún and the Riviera Maya

México was faced with economic difficulties in the 1960s and in response began to engage in state-sponsored development in order to stimulate industrial production.¹²⁴ Yet, this was not enough to improve the economy; consequently the Mexican government shifted its attention to tourism. Even though Acapulco had

¹²⁴ Daniel Nicolas-Hiernaut, "Cancún Bliss," in *The Infrastructure of Play: Building the Tourist City*, ed. Dennis R. Judd. Armonk (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 127.

flourished since the 1930s, the tourist environment of this Pacific coastal city had changed by the 1960s. Squatter towns, poverty, and lack of infrastructure began to shape not only the inner city, but also areas along the tourist zone.¹²⁵ Therefore Mexican politicians, such as Antonio Enríquez Savignac began the search for a new tourist destination in México.¹²⁶ Savignac took full initiative of this task by means of flying via helicopter to locate other prospective sites. In his search he came across the area where Cancún is today in northern Quintana Roo, located along México's Caribbean coast. During this time the only thing that connected Cancún and the nearby fishing village of Puerto Juárez to the rest of México was a highway to Merida. México's Cancún project was accepted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 1964 and the IDB funded a loan of around US\$27 million dollars for the development of Cancún. Cancún became an official tourist destination in 1976 during the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976).

¹²⁵ This stratification has deepened throughout the years. The tourism in Acapulco has drastically decreased and has caused many former workers in the tourist industry to migrate to other resort coasts, such as Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Nuevo Vallarta, and Los Cabos.

¹²⁶ Harvard educated Savignac later created and directed México's national tourism development organization, *Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo* (FONATUR).

Despite the Mexican government's justifications that it was attempting to counter regional inequality by producing more jobs, the areas of marginalization of the local population in Cancún were planned from the initial development stages. As can be seen from the image below, Mexican developers of Cancún plotted the resort areas on the Caribbean coast, while workers and other local services were situated inside the mainland of Cancún.¹²⁷

Map 7: Cancún and Hotel Zone



Source: Courtesy of Google Images.

¹²⁷ Cancún is situated on a long barrier island that divided the Caribbean Sea from the Nichupté Lagoon.

This was precisely done to avoid the mistakes of Acapulco, where squatter towns were visible from the major tourist resorts.¹²⁸ According to geographer Daniel Hiernaux-Nicolas,

“The tourist area was to be isolated from the urban zone containing the central business district and residence of service and administrative workers; and middle-class housing was slated for four-story buildings, with standard layouts and construction materials. Tourists were expected to arrive in Cancún through the international airport and be transported directly to the hotel resort. Then they would spend all their holiday at the same place and return home....the designers of Cancún were very strict about segregation.”¹²⁹

The significant barriers between the luxurious resorts and its workers were a success for Mexican developers. Cancún has been one of the few Mexican cities that have maintained an annual population growth rate above 6%. According to the last Mexican Census in 2005 the population of Cancún was more than 600,000, which is expected to rise to about 2,571,000 by 2030 (INEGI). Nevertheless, as the population and the tourist spaces of Cancún have drastically expanded in the past ten years, there also has been international attention regarding the protection of social and human rights of workers and environmental concerns in the state of Quintana Roo.

From 1984 to 1994 northern Quintana Roo was regarded as one of the fastest growing industrial regions in México. Activities that began to be incorporated into Cancún vacations packages included shopping, commercial projects, water sports, fine dining, Maya culture shows, and visits to the ancient Maya ruins of Chichin Itza, Cobá, and Tulum. In addition, many Europeans began to extend their stay further

¹²⁸ Many people from Guerrero can no longer find jobs in the tourist sector of Acapulco. Therefore, they are migrating to other thriving tourist regions, such as Puerto Vallarta and they are especially visible in Los Cabos.

¹²⁹ Hiernaux-Nicolas, 129.

south than Cancún in the early 1980s in search of more exotic and less crowded beaches. This was an escape from commercial Cancún, resulting in the Riviera Maya expansion. This area is known to have been an important commercial and religious center for the ancient Maya during the Post-Classic Period (1000-1500 A.D.). Undeveloped jungle, stunning coastline and barrier coral reefs have been replaced with the Riviera Maya, also known as the Mayan Riviera, which extends 135km miles along the coastline from Cancún to Tulum (see map 6). The Mexican government has created state-sponsored resorts in the Riviera Maya, which Hiernaux Nicolas refers to as “toursification that has in turn created a variety of new market niches.”¹³⁰ Thus, other tourist centers besides Cancún have been promoted by the Mexican Tourism Board (Consejo de Promoción Turística de México), such as Playa del Carmen, Cozumel, Islas Mujeres, and Puerto Morelos. In addition, giant, all-inclusive resorts, golf courses and acres of land have been turned into ‘environmental’ friendly theme-based tourist parks, such as Xcaret, Xel-Há and Tres Ríos, charging expensive entrance fees.¹³¹

Puerto Morelos, located 20 miles south of Cancún along the Riviera Maya is still regarded as “real México.” According to the New York Times, “Thanks to the cadre of local activists, the town has managed to push back against the mega-developers and sustain something that feels, smells and tastes like the *real México*.”¹³² Unfortunately the reporter for this article only seems to have interviewed several of

¹³⁰ Hiernaux-Nicolas, 138.

¹³¹ Daniel C. Schechter and Ray Bartlett ed. *Lonely Planet: Yucatán*. 3rd ed. Lonely Planet. 2006), 94.

¹³² Nancy Schuessler, “What México Once Was.” 4 Jan. 2009. *New York Times.com* <http://travel.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/travel/04surface.html> (accessed April 4, 2009).

its many international residents, including tourists sipping margaritas at bars known as Sarah's place, gringos from Boston who own Mexican-handicraft shops, and "traditional" Mexican restaurant owners like John Gray's Kitchen.

What was once a sleepy fishing village has now turned into a gateway for Europeans and Canadians in their RVs and divers who come to explore the world's second largest barrier reef.¹³³ Environmental concerns have been a deep concern in this area, especially to protect the mangroves. Puerto Morelos, like Playa del Carmen, has established laws that do not allow construction buildings taller than three stories. Nonetheless, hotels taller than three stories are continually being built along the Riviera Maya. The Spanish mega-resort *El Cid*, which was completed in 2007, is a good example of such building code violations in Puerto Morelos. The Spanish have been quite successful in developing all inclusive mega-resorts in the area. The Mexican Economic Secretary reports that between 1999 and 2006 the Spanish invested close to US\$114 million dollars in Quintana Roo, 70% of that investment was concentrated in the hotel industry.¹³⁴

Playa del Carmen (35 miles south of Cancún), also referred to as Playa became popular among Europeans, such as Italians, Spanish, Swiss, and Germans.

¹³³ El Cid, a Spanish hotel chain, has recently built a \$240 million dollar five start resort of 600 rooms, which not only violated thousands of worker's rights fair employment, worker safety, and housing. But with the help of México's corruption the Spanish corporation violated México's law of building 20 meters away from the shore. This has damaged large parts of the mangroves, which are nature's mechanism for protecting the coasts from erosion, surge storms, and tsunamis. Data collected from interviews by author.

¹³⁴Carlos Amorín, "Construcción hotelera desenfrenada: turismo con esclavos incluidos," 24 January 2008. *International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations*-Secretaría Regional Latinoamericana: Montevideo, Uruguay, http://www.reluita.org/sectores/hrct/turismo_con_esclavos.htm (accessed April 4, 2009).

Many decided to stay in the area and later developed local businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, and hostels. In addition, ferries from Playa del Carmen began to offer scuba diving expeditions to Cozumel. Today, many small businesses in Playa del Carmen are still owned by Europeans. Cubans and Argentines have also found employment opportunities in many of the upper service sectors, such as bartending, waitressing, and as hotel receptionists.

Small business owners in Playa have tried to cooperate with big businesses, chain restaurants, and mega-resorts, although they have had little success. American chains such as Burger King, Starbucks, T.G.I. Fridays', and McDonalds are all located along the famous pedestrian walkway that runs parallel to the beach—the *Quinta Avenida*. Today the Playa region is not only a vacation gateway for Europeans travelers, but international tourists ranging from spring breakers, honeymooners, and families find an array of entertainment opportunities along the *Quinta Avenida*. Also, the private gated community of *Playacar*, located on the southern end of Playa, consists of upscale developments (a majority Spanish owned) that offer all-inclusive hotels, private condos, and a world-class 18-hole golf course. The Municipality (township) of Solidaridad, where Playa de Carmen—the fastest growing city in México is located, increased in population from 67,640 in 2000 to about 104,764 in 2005 and has become the fastest growing city in México.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ For discussion, see “Problemática,” 22 and Moctezuma, “Playa del Carmen.”

Table 2: Population Increase in Northern Quintana Roo, 2000-2005

Year	Municipality Benito Juárez		Municipality Solidaridad		State of Quintana Roo	
	Population	% Increase	Population	% Increase	Population	% Increase
2000	433,134		67,640		874,963	
2001	454,821	5	74,714	10.4	932,411	6.6
2002	476,482	4.8	81,969	9.7	951,462	2
2003	498,103	4.5	89,401	9.1	992,185	4.3
2004	519,656	4.3	97,001	8.5	1,091,958	10.1
2005	541,148	4.1	104,764	8	1,135,309	4
2000-2005		4.5		9.1		4.7

Source: CONAPO-COESPO Quintana Roo, Data Adapted from “Problemática de los trabajadores migrantes,” table 1.10.

The high demands of construction

There is a vast amount of employment opportunities resulting from the rapid development projects across the Riviera Maya. Specifically, there is a high demand for construction of all-inclusive resorts, condominiums, and private villas, which provide flexible and temporary employment opportunities. There has also been a significant increase in migration to the area in order to meet the demand for hotel restoration after natural disasters such as Hurricane Wilma in 2005. Subsequently, labor recruiters were sent to nearby southern Mexican states to recruit workers by the

truckloads and busloads. Over the next two years after Wilma hit, 2005-2007, 25,000 people settled in Riviera Maya cities such as Cancún and Playa del Carmen.¹³⁶

According to the College of Architecture of Quintana Roo, hotel construction typically demands seven workers per hotel room and 5.3 workers for personal living spaces such as villas.¹³⁷ These workers may consist of general building laborers such as bricklayers, carpenters, and blacksmiths. Currently there are over 2,000 rooms being built every year in the Riviera Maya. In 2001, 26,194 rooms existed in Cancún and by 2005 the number had jumped to 27,406 rooms. In the Riviera Maya there was an overall 44% increase in room construction during those same five years.¹³⁸ For a mega-resort, which typically is completed in less than a year, about 3,000 workers are needed for the overall construction work and 60% of these are needed solely for laying bricks.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Gloria Leticia Díaz, 27.

¹³⁷ “Problemática,” 28.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 19

¹³⁹ México, “Diagnóstico,” 17.

Table 3: Increase of Hotel Rooms Constructed in the Riviera Maya, 2001-2005

City	2001	2005	Difference	% Increase
Cancún	26,194	27,406	1,212	4.6
<u>Riviera Maya</u>	<u>18,731</u>	<u>26,980</u>	<u>8,249</u>	<u>44</u>
Cozumel	3,873	4,205	332	8.6
Puerto Morelos	598	1,455	857	143.3
Total in Northern Quintana Roo	50,516	61,381	10,865	21.5

Source: Secretaría de Turismo del Estado de Quintana Roo (SEDETUR) and Data Adapted from “Problemática de los trabajadores migrantes,” table 1.8.

In recent years, the Riviera Maya has received many journalists, Mexican politicians, Non-Government Organizations, and academic research teams who have come to address issues ranging from sustainable development, protecting archeological zones, and saving Maya culture, but no consideration has focused on actually protecting the working and living rights of the Maya people. As Wilson reminds us, “Living people are being trashed in the interest of the capitalist development.”¹⁴⁰ Yet, these issues have never been fully undertaken by the Mexican government. Most recently, the Mexican government has been thoroughly engaged in combating the “war on drugs.” Hiernaux-Nicolas states that, “Planning efforts

¹⁴⁰ Wilson, 49.

have been supplanted by the desire to use Cancún as a platform for profits. With the current flow of drug money into Cancún, disorganized capitalism offers new activities for entrepreneurs.”¹⁴¹ Without a doubt this has been proven in the state of Quintana Roo. In the late 1990s, Quintana Roo Governor, Mario E. Villanueva Madrid, was arrested for drug trafficking and accused of having economic ties with traffickers in Colombia. Today some military forces remain in Quintana Roo to guard the Belize border, to track illegal runways, and to stop the laundering of drug money. However, the protection of the environment and workers rights has been merely an insignificant concern.

Construction workers and their living and working conditions

The Santa Cruz Mayas, descendants of the Cruzoob, have been long-time residents of the state of Quintana Roo. In the late 1970s, during the Cancún tourist boom, many indigenous Maya from other parts of the Yucatán peninsula began migrating to the Riviera Maya. These Maya shared language and many culture practices of the Santa Cruz Mayas.¹⁴² Today the majority of immigrants in northern Quintana Roo come from the states of Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán, and México City.

Massive migration to northern Quintana Roo has caused irregular population settlements around the outskirts of the cities of Cancún and Playa del Carmen.

According to Ludger Brenner and Adrian Guillermo Aguilar,

¹⁴¹ Hiernaux-Nicolas, 139.

¹⁴² Ana Juárez, “Ongoing Struggles: Mayas and Immigrants in Tourist Era Tulum,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 7 (2002), 43.

“The urban infrastructures required to meet the needs of the migrants has not been taken into account adequately either by FONATUR or by any other government institutions, which concentrated their efforts on hotel construction and largely left the migrant population unattended.”¹⁴³

A majority of Cancún’s population lives along the outskirts of the city in the zone known as Franja Ejidal, where there are thousands of people live without running water, sewage system, and electricity. The booming population in Playa del Carmen has also led to the formation of the squatter town of Luis Rolando Colosio. When driving from Cancún to Playa del Carmen, one can notice the Colosio community--vendors selling goods from China, local children playing soccer in the plaza, and young couples holding hands. Most of the community of Colosio is composed of people that have immigrated over the years and have found steady jobs in the service sector.

Former Maya migrants, such as those from Yucatán that began migrating in the late 1970s, have established kin networks in Cancún, which has included female migration.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, the migration from Chiapas to the Riviera Maya has been quite irregular. Chiapanecos migrants are young, single men, who have left their families back home and very few have settled permanently. The majority of migrants from Chiapas stay between three to six months, then return to their hometowns, and often times return again to the Riviera Maya for temporary employment.¹⁴⁵ According to the Mexican *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (INM-

¹⁴³ Brenner and Aguilar, 515.

¹⁴⁴ For discussion, see Castellanos and Re Cruz, *The Two*.

¹⁴⁵ In the study this is referred to as *pendular migration*. “Problemática,”19.

National Migration Institute) the migration of Chiapanecos to the state of Quintana Roo has opened the routes for Guatemalan migrants as well. There have also been recorded cases where ex-Guatemalan Civil War refugees that live in both México and Guatemala have come for work in the tourist zones of Quintana Roo.¹⁴⁶

Many migrants from Chiapas have been promised by their contractors, known as *piratas* (pirates), a stable job in construction, a suitable place to live and higher wages than they would normally receive in their homelands of the northern regions of Chiapas. When Chiapanecos arrive in Quintana Roo they soon realize that what they are told by the pirates are promises that are never going to be fulfilled. Compared to other migrant workers in Quintana Roo, who have established migratory networks in the Riviera Maya, they do not to speak Spanish, and often times lack official documentation, thus making them even more vulnerable to exploitation by other migrant workers, law enforcement, business owners, developers, and even tourists.

As a result of neoliberal policies, the price of basic living standards of food, housing, and water are extremely high in Quintana Roo compared to the rest of México. Although wages are higher in this area of México¹⁴⁷, they do not allow for a living standard much above the survival level. “It is the working-class Mexicans who are excluded, while the Mexican elites frolic beside the foreigners.” Capitalist

¹⁴⁶ México, “Diagnóstico,” 3.

¹⁴⁷ “Daily Minimum Wages 2009,” *Meixcanlaws S.A. de C.V.* Tijuana, Baja California, January 1, 2009, http://www.mexicanlaws.com/STPS/minimum_wages_2009.htm (accessed April 8, 2009).

development policy interests are at the top of México's government agenda in Quintana Roo, thus failing to provide adequate funding for state programs such as education, housing, or healthcare in Quintana Roo. According to Alicia Re Cruz,

“Migration is a social phenomenon that displaces people. In the Maya case, it uproots the peasants from their familiar rural area and brings them to an arduous process of orchestrating their socioeconomic and cultural baggage within the unfamiliar, sometimes hostile urban setting.”¹⁴⁸

Quintana Roo's dramatic expansion has not only increased population and exploited immigrant's working and living conditions, but it has overloaded the infrastructures. Maya construction workers arriving daily to the Riviera Maya, especially from Chiapas and Central America, typically live in *cuarterias* (rented rooms) in the outskirts of Cancún or in Playa del Carmen where rent is more affordable. Some are offered housing through their employer in worker camps. Worker camps, provided by the contractors, are typically free, but come with a high price to pay. First of all these camps consist of suffocating rooms without ventilation, no electricity, and beds that are either hammocks or cardboard mattresses. Workers that can afford it, return home after the work week on Saturday afternoons, and many that stay are left without housing for the weekend. Frequently Maya workers are seen sleeping in parks and outside churches.

Workers are very vulnerable to abuse from either local authorities or other migrants. Furthermore, they constantly have to worry about being robbed of their shoes, clothing, and even equipment, such as a hard-hat that they must provide for

¹⁴⁸ Re Cruz, “The Thousand,” 288.

themselves. Another difficulty that residents at these camps face is the presence of drugs and alcohol users. Often, workers that sell illicit drugs steal from other workers and when the police are called, they are simply paid off. The police usually search those workers who are innocent or those who are victims of these crimes, and take whatever little money these workers have.¹⁴⁹

Unfortunately many migrant's experiences have turned out violent. For example, instead of having an actual recreational location, these migrants spend their weekends abusing alcohol and walking along the highway intoxicated. Various violent deaths of migrants have occurred either by police officers, other migrants, or accidents by vehicles along the side of Highway 400, which runs along the coast of Quintana Roo. According to the *Cámara Nacional de Autotransporte de Pasaje y Turismo* (CANAPAT-National Association of Highways and Tourism), a large number of irregular buses do not make it to Quintana Roo.¹⁵⁰ A majority of these irregular buses come with workers from Chiapas along the Ocosingo-Palenque highway into Quintana Roo where the winding roads are deadly for any unaware driver.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, those that are reported dead are often left unidentified, regardless if they are Mexican or Guatemalan. Quite often these deaths are reported as natural deaths.

Often times deaths are results of fatal accidents because many work without adequate protection, such as proper shoes and hard hats. In 2007, 174 construction

¹⁴⁹ Gloria Leticia Díaz, 25.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵¹ The price of a bus from Chiapas to Quintana Roo ranges from \$15 to \$80 and the average being about \$35.

worker deaths were reported in the Riviera Maya. Physiologists in Cancún conclude that besides deaths caused by work-related accidents and heat, suicide is one of the most common types of causes of construction worker deaths in Cancún. In 2006, 120 cases of suicides were reported in Cancún. The majority of the victims were construction workers, 80% male, whose cause of death was hanging.¹⁵²

Despite the fact that México's maximum legal workweek is 48 hours and 8 hours maximum for a workday, Chiapaneco construction worker's rights are quite often violated in the Riviera Maya. There have been plenty of recorded cases of construction laborers who have been overworked and underpaid. Many construction workers in Quintana Roo are not unionized, although the *Sindicato de Trabajadores, Obreros y Empleados* (SITEC) is said to represent the majority of the 90,000 construction workers in the Riviera Maya. SITEC has attempted on various occasions to bring attention to the Mexican Secretariat of Labor and Social Provision (Secretaría del Trabajo Previsión Social or STPS), but has had little or no success in bringing justice to the workers. Chapter Four will further explain how employer's representatives and representatives from the labor unions, inhibit justice to be brought out.

Rapid population growth in northern Quintana Roo will continue to create massive and marginal urbanization in what were once small villages such as Cancún, Puerto Morelos, Cozumel, Islas Mujeres, and now Tulum. Further, large-scale

¹⁵²Hugo Martoccia, "Cancún, la vida tras el oropel," *La Jornada.com* December 27, 2006. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/12/27/index.php?section=sociedad&article=036n1soc> (accessed April 4, 2009).

development is already extending to the locations in the southeast tip of Quintana Roo, such as Mahahual and Xcalak, known as the Costa Maya region in order to meet the high demands of tourism.

Tourists are no longer looking just for relaxation on the beach, but traveler's experiences in this *Mundo Maya* are being shaped by activities, such as tours to Maya ruins, jungle expeditions, shopping, nightclubs, and water-sports. Currently, the *Secretary de Turismo* (Mexican Secretariat of Tourism) has eight mega-tourism projects in México, one being a multinational project the *Proyecto Mundo Maya*, which began in 1988 with agreements between Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and the Mexican states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán and Quintana Roo.¹⁵³

In order to meet these high tourist demands, development continues to increase in the region thus providing new economic opportunities for some and limiting others. Public services and the overall living standards of immigrants are worsening as more and more immigrants are arriving and basic necessities are not being met. Shaped by uneven development, Maya immigrants continuously face marginalization, violence, and poor work and living conditions in the Riviera Maya. The following chapter will further explore these issues from the perspectives of different actors in the region, but particularly from the viewpoint and experiences of the workers themselves.

¹⁵³ For discussion, see Secretaria de Turismo, *Programa Mundo Maya*, 8 December 2008. http://www.sectur.gob.mx/wb2/sectur/sect_Programa_Mundo_Maya (accessed May 4, 2009).

CHAPTER 4-A Case Study in the Riviera Maya

In this chapter I use ethnographic accounts to analyze how Chiapaneco migrant construction workers in the Riviera Maya interpret social inequities, experience marginalization and respond to suffering in Quintana Roo. Based on these ethnographic accounts of workers and other actors in the region such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Church organizations, journalists, and academics, I assess factors that lead to the subordination of migrant workers. This study is not intended to cover all the challenges that tourism brings to the area; rather it is intended to identify the faces and acknowledge the voices of those that are exploited in the Riviera Maya hotel construction industry.

Methodology

In early July 2008, I began fieldwork in México City, the center for México's press and scholarly resources, to identify the key players researching and addressing immigration issues in Quintana Roo. Prior to arriving in México, I was granted permission to conduct interviews by the University of Kansas's Human Subjects Committee. I began this qualitative study with standardized open- and close-ended questions. Prior to my arrival in México, I chose participants through contacts via email and through my established personal contacts in México City.¹⁵⁴ In México City, I was able to gather information and statistical data and make more contacts to for research in my field site. When I arrived in Cancún, I interviewed similar groups

¹⁵⁴ I emailed specific institutions and organizations prior to arriving in México. In addition, I had contacts from previous travels.

using the same methods as in México City. During the last three weeks of July, I commuted between the towns of Puerto Morelos and Playa del Carmen, determined to immerse myself in the everyday lives and environment of the hotel construction workers. Playa del Carmen served as my main field site because I could find affordable housing and have access to larger number of workers.

In Puerto Morelos and Playa del Carmen, I delved deeper into my qualitative study with interviews and ethnographic accounts of migrant workers and other actors involved in immigration issues. I chose my 30 interviewees with workers in the Riviera Maya through non-random sampling. In Puerto Morelos, I conducted 12 interviews in public spaces such as buses, parks, and plazas. In Playa del Carmen, I conducted 18 interviews with workers that were either introduced to me by community members, were chosen by me through judgmental sampling in public spaces around the city, and through participant observation. I selected my participants with the help of organizations that have direct contact with the immigrants. Therefore, I was able to explain the objectives of my research and my intentions of understanding their experiences in the Riviera Maya. My background as a Mexican and native Spanish speaker facilitated my travels between sites. Although, I had designed a series of questions before arriving in the field, it was my unscripted questions that allowed the participants to really engage in conversation with me. These informal interviews allowed me to establish and maintain a connection with these workers.

It was difficult for me to distinguish between Chiapaneco workers and Guatemalan workers because they share the same language, facial features, and feelings of intimidation by and fear of Mexican officials. Furthermore, many of these young men already shared victimization and disillusionment from their unfortunate experiences in Quintana Roo. Even though the state's human rights organization, *La Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Estado de Quintana Roo* (CDHEQRO), journalists, and NGO's have published reports on the migrants' exploitation, very little has been done to counteract human rights abuses. In addition, I was a Mexican female that looked "non-Mexican" and spoke Spanish differently than they did.¹⁵⁵ Despite some of the challenges that I encountered, I was still able to gain trust of many of these young workers. A male friend of mine visited me during the first few days of my fieldwork. We visited the areas of Playa del Carmen where workers lived and spent their free time, and we rode on the same public transits that workers used. In order to protect the interests of my interviewees, I have omitted their names from this case study.

Field work in México City

Through an acquaintance I was introduced to a professor at the Colegio de México (Colmex). This scholar is recognized for his work regarding México-Guatemala migration relations. He also runs a collaborative development research group between the two countries, the *Grupo Guatemala-México Sobre Migración y Desarrollo*. Although I was hoping he could provide me with data on immigration

¹⁵⁵ For discussion, see Subject Positionality in Chapter 1.

patterns to Quintana Roo, I discovered during our interview—like with many of my other connections, that he was not familiar with my topic and that his research focuses on Guatemala-México relations, particularly on temporary agricultural workers in Chiapas.

Several journalists, radio show producers, and university professors from the Tecnológico de Monterrey in México City that I interviewed were also unfamiliar with Guatemalan migration to Quintana Roo, which can partly be explained by the distance between Quintana Roo and México City and how disconnected the former was from the latter. However, a journalist from the Mexican political magazine *Proceso* that I contacted turned out to be a valuable resource for conducting fieldwork in México. I remained in contact via-email with the correspondent, and he provided me with the majority of my primary contacts in Quintana Roo.

I also met with the director of México's International Organization of Migration (IOM) and was able to have an in-depth discussion on migration issues inside of México. The director highlighted how México has become a key crossing point for migrants coming from Central and South America on their way to the United States:

We find it significantly important to advance the return procedures of many of these irregular migrants back to their home countries. México has established bi-national commissions with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in order to assure orderly return back to their countries. Often times we receive phone calls from Mexican immigration officials with detained migrants and then we handle contacting their countries' consulates.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Interview by author, July 17, 2008, México City.

We discussed the migration movements of transit migrants in México, and the director provided me with a collection of primary sources, such as World Migration Reports, IOM publications, books on North American immigration and statistics, and *Migraciones en el Sur de México y Centroamérica*, which has assisted me immensely in this study.

A Case study in the Riviera Maya

From July 22nd-August 7th, 2008, I conducted fieldwork in the Riviera Maya. Initially, I had chosen Puerto Morelos as my official field site, but due to the high price of lodging there, I relocated to Playa del Carmen. In Playa del Carmen, I was able to stay in a more affordable youth hostel. I interviewed various people such as bus drivers, hotel and restaurant managers, hotel cleaning staff, and service industry workers, but I focused my interviews primarily on construction laborers. Even though I did not spend an extended period of time “in the field”, I was able to establish contacts and be more comfortable in their environs. I was able to document Maya construction worker’s own voices through ethnographic accounts of the calamities that they have encountered along the Riviera Maya.

Cancún

I flew into Quintana Roo’s capital, Cancún, on July 22nd and stayed for several days. I first met with a well-known journalist and author of a book that profiles Quintana Roo’s former governor, Mario Villanueva Madrid. The writer warmly received me in the newspaper office of *El Diario de Quintana Roo*. He provided valuable information related to socioeconomic issues, the effect of the

construction boom, the invasion of Playa del Carmen by tourists and migrants, legal vs. illegal operations, such as those done by workers' unions. The journalist revealed:

Many of the unions are only in place nominally. What they actually report is often brushed off by a quick bribe from the contractor or supervisors to the union leaders, so that it shows that the place is actually unionized. They document minimal details and come back to Cancún with quite different stories than what they actually observed at the construction work sites. Solidaridad (the municipal where Playa del Carmen is located) has received the most cases of human rights abuses in the state of Quintana Roo, but only the bare minimum has been done to protect these rights.¹⁵⁷

He explained that I would have no trouble finding these exploited workers. Along the Riviera Maya highway from Cancún to Tulum, there is an assortment of construction development projects, ranging from roads to shopping centers to mega-resorts.

However, he warned me that most workers would not agree to be interviewed because they fear losing their job, feel threatened by the police and other local officials, or, especially in the case of Guatemalans, fear deportation.¹⁵⁸

Puerto Morelos

In Puerto Morelos, I met the director of the National Council for the Tourist Promotion of Puerto Morelos (Consejo Nacional de Promoción Turística de Puerto Morelos), who is also the owner of a local restaurant and hotel. He is a community activist well known for being a staunch advocate for the protection of the coral reef and social development in Puerto Morelos. Over the years, he has had a substantial

¹⁵⁷ Interview by author, July 25, 2008, Cancún.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

amount of news reporters, students, and researchers come to the area to study the reef and to report on the environmental deterioration in the area.

He emphasized his aggravation with the multinational hotel companies that have violated environmental laws in Puerto Morelos with the help of Mexican business associates. He was referring to Spanish hotels, such as *El Cid*, which has 400 rooms and is owned by one of the most important tourist groups in México as well as the Spanish hotel chain of *NH*.¹⁵⁹ This hotel chain owns shopping centers, a marina and yacht club, botanical gardens, a museum, and an ecological tourist park in the area. He explained:

Both resorts violated many laws, especially environmental laws, but the Mexican government and wealthy Mexican businessmen just accepted the quick money. Members from organizations such the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Semarnat) have granted permission for various illegal construction jobs.¹⁶⁰

Violations include construction of hotels on the mangroves, which help protect the coasts from erosion and storms. Furthermore, he added:

For example NH destroyed around 70 acres of mangroves, they constructed a five story hotel, violating the 1998 Plan Director Desarrollo Urbano de Puerto Morelos that only allows a maximum of four story hotels, they violated the Mexican *Zona Federal Marítimo Terrestre* (The Federal Zone), a barrier zone running from the high-tide along the beach and 20 meters landward where construction is not permitted, but NH constructed at 4 meters and in addition constructed 550 rooms per acre, when only 30 rooms are allowed per acre, thus exceeding an extra 220 rooms.

¹⁵⁹ NH is a Spanish corporate hotel chain that has 344 hotels in 22 countries across Europe, North America, and Africa. For discussion, see <http://corporate-information.nh-hotels.com/eng/index.jsp> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹⁶⁰ Interview by author, August 1, 2008, Puerto Morelos.

He expressed his frustrations with inadequate responses of social services from the government and lack of enforcements by local police in Puerto Morelos.

We have a population of about 24,000 people and only one school, one junior high that is taught through the T.V., and absolutely no health clinic. What bothers me the most is the 250 locations that sell alcohol to the general public, especially to the construction workers who spend most of their time and money consuming alcohol. In addition, the law here can simply be paid off with bribes.

Most importantly, he illustrated his genuine appreciation for the hard work that many of his Chiapaneco employees do at his restaurant and hotel:

“They are one of the hardest working and respectful people out there.”

He pointed and called over the young lady who was mopping the restaurant floor. She greeted me and explained to me that she came from the Simajovel region in Chiapas and that she had arrived with some relatives who were working in construction. She smiled at me and quickly resumed mopping.

I returned to Puerto Morelos one Saturday afternoon where I boarded the local bus and notified the driver that I planned to stay on the bus for a couple of round trips to do some sightseeing. The most desirable time for me to conduct interviews with workers in Puerto Morelos was after 1:00 P.M., because most construction workers leave the construction camp sites after being paid to either Cancún or Playa where rent is more affordable, and some go back to their states of origin. Typically, the only people that ride the bus are workers from the hotels, while guests staying at El Cid ride in taxis or hotel shuttles. The bus driver assumed I was staying in the hotel and

allowed me on, but after we passed El Cid he questioned me. I quickly responded that I was just sightseeing even though I knew that I had not totally convinced him.

I still remember the sweltering Caribbean heat and humidity on the bus that July day. I felt a sudden rush of panic as we drove past the security guards into the restricted area. On my right-hand side stood the completed El Cid resort and further ahead I noticed the massive construction site, soon to be another Spanish mega-resort. Looking through the bus window, the construction workers appeared like thousands of ants on an ant hill. Some workers waited for the bus, others stood around waiting for their supervisors to give them their weekly compensation, and some simply rested along the side of the immense ram-shackled buildings that resembled refugee camps pictured in the National Geographic.

I slouched down on the bus seat and quickly began snapping pictures of whatever my camera could capture. The bus driver looked back through the rear view window and just shook his head at me, but I kept snapping away trying to avoid being seen by the engineers or supervisors outside. I noticed several women out on the construction sites and wondered why I had not been told about them before. I was later informed by a construction worker that women are contracted for cleaning the finished constructed rooms, such as scraping excess paint, cleaning the floors, and selling food and drinks to the workers.

Suddenly the bus came to a stop and the workers began to shuffle onto the sweltering bus. I suddenly felt a wave of nervousness run from my head to my feet as I was surrounded by at least 30 exhausted workers who quickly noticed me. A young

man sat next to me and began investigating why I was taking so many pictures. I soon realized that the young man was trying to interview me. He was an 18-year-old from the state of Tabasco, and he explained to me that he assumed I was a government human rights representative from the state of Quintana Roo.¹⁶¹

We have seen many journalists and employees from the Human Rights Commission of the State of Quintana Roo (CDHEQR) come out here and write up reports. Nothing ever comes out of their stories. They are aware of the circumstances here but completely ignore the issues. Often times they take bribes from the contractors themselves.¹⁶²

When we got off the bus, he showed me around the park of the Colonia Joaquín Zetina Gasca in Puerto Morelos where many of the construction workers hang out during their time off. He explained:

Most of their paychecks will be finished by Sunday because they spend it all on alcohol or drugs. They are brutal people who often kill each other. It is quite common to hear stories reporting that they have been found dead here.

By “they” he was referring to the indigenous Chiapanecos. This was a common expression by non-indigenous immigrants in the region, which I later discuss.

The young migrant mentioned that he would rather live with the squatters of Cancún because it was more affordable, and most importantly, because he could have his privacy and avoid the violence in the camps. Furthermore, he acknowledged that he someday planned to return to Tabasco because this was not the right place to bring his wife and one-year-old son. He also stated that he sent about 5% of his earnings

¹⁶¹ It estimated that about 50% of workers are under the age of 18, which is most preferred by labor contractors. “They are considered more complacent, they have are more resistant to physical labor, and do not complain about horrible conditions.” Gloria Leticia Diaz, 27.

¹⁶² Interview by author, August 2, 2008, Puerto Morelos.

back to Tabasco, but I was highly skeptical. He could have been telling me the truth, or he could have been one of the thousands of young migrants that never return home and spend most of their income on alcohol.¹⁶³ The young migrant cautioned me, just as the business-owner in Puerto Morelos and many others had, not to stay in the area past 6:00 P.M. because the workers would be already under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. I thanked the young Tabasqueño for his time and walked him to the bus stop where he was headed north to Cancún.¹⁶⁴

That day, I conducted seven interviews with workers that were leaving the construction sites in Puerto Morelos. I distinctly remember an 18-year-old migrant from Sierra Lacandon, Chiapas who had previously lived inside the workers' camp. He had just received his US\$180 weekly pay and was on his way to the park to meet some friends for the evening. The worker spoke about how he was brought on a bus from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas with about 25 other Chiapanecos by a contractor, and he was promised work and a place to stay when he arrived to Quintana Roo.¹⁶⁵ He mentioned to me that he had been paid only a week's work and that he was later dismissed with having received half of his expected pay. He also explained to me that he did not trust anyone around him.

In the labor camps other workers have stolen my shoes, helmet, and even underwear! There police love to take advantage of us as well. There were these guys from my work who got drunk one Saturday evening who had their

¹⁶³ About 60% of those interviewed drink alcohol and spend about \$10 a week on alcohol. "Problemática," 51. Of the 30 interviews that I conducted all admitted to either drinking or drinking only on the weekends.

¹⁶⁴ See Illustration 1.

¹⁶⁵ Of the 12 Chiapanecos that I interviewed in Puerto Morelos, over half of them informed me that they had been recruited either in San Cristóbal de las Casas or somewhere near by piratas.

saw and hammer stolen from them by the police. I prefer to drink here, because once you are out there and happen to get drunk the police just jump you for whatever you got.¹⁶⁶

He looked for work at other construction sites only to find that he had to provide documentation of his legal status. Occasionally indigenous workers from Chiapas arrive with no form of documentation.

The Mexican federal government has established locations where migrants can receive unemployment benefits, but one of the major requirements is documentation. On one occasion, I walked by a Mexican Secretary of Labor and Social Provision (STPS) office in Playa, and I noticed the paper on the door that listed the requirements needed to receive US\$220 dollars in state unemployment benefits¹⁶⁷ The requirement for having a social security number (provided by the Mexican Social Security Institute, or IMSS, which allocates public health, pensions, and social security) or a Federal Electoral Card (Institute Federal Electoral or IFE) is extremely difficult for many indigenous people to meet, many of whom do not even have a birth certificate. This requirement hinders a large portion of these Mexican national migrants from receiving any type of employment benefits.

The STPS has a notorious reputation for minimally protecting construction workers in the Riviera Maya. The STPS is required to inspect construction sites to see if they meet state hygiene and security regulations. Only one inspector from the STPS represents the entire state of Quintana Roo. In 2006, only 23 sites were

¹⁶⁶ Interview by author, August 2, 2008, Puerto Morelos.

¹⁶⁷ See Illustration 2.

inspected, where about 3,000 hotel rooms are being built per year.¹⁶⁸ The STPS has achieved little success in assuring construction worker rights even though it has received persistent pressure from worker unions such as the *Sindicato de Trabajadores, Obreros y Empleados* (SITEC). Construction laborers received some health protection in 2005 when the Secretary of Health of Quintana Roo signed an agreement with SITEC to visit construction sites. In addition to their visit, they distributed 5,000 condoms to protect the total 90,000 construction workers in the state.¹⁶⁹

During one of my bus trips between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, I met a young Chiapaneco immigrant who commutes to Puerto Morelos to work as a hotel room painter. I could hear desperation and a sense of helplessness in the tone of his voice. He was also from the Sierra Lacandon of Chiapas and explained that he had already worked in construction in the area before as well as in Nuevo Vallarta (the expansion of Puerto Vallarta) and Los Cabos San Lucas in Baja California.¹⁷⁰ I asked him why he had returned to Quintana Roo and he stated,

My father works at the *Moon Palace*, and even though the pay is higher in Los Cabos the cost of living here is so much cheaper, and the best part about it is that I am closer to home.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ “Sindicatos ricos, trabajadores pobres,” February 17, 2008, *Archivo Confidencial*, Hermosillo, Sonora, México <http://www.archivoconfidencial.com.mx/?c=128&a=6584> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹⁶⁹ “Sindicatos ricos.”

¹⁷⁰ Due to its close geographic proximity to the U.S., Los Cabos has recently become an American tourist hot spot where Hollywood stars escape for weekend runaways and is regarded as one the most expensive tourist destinations in México. Baja California is the state that receives the most Chiapanecos in México; either to work in the various industries or as a transit state to reach the U.S.

¹⁷¹ The Moon Palace is one of the largest mega-resort chains in the Riviera Maya. For discussion, see <http://www.palaceresorts.com/>

Of the 30 workers that I interviewed, over half responded that the Riviera's close proximity to Chiapas influenced their decision to migrate.

The gringos seem to be stomping their foot down. I remember last year they brought this guy's body back to my hometown, because they had found him dead somewhere near Nogales. Thank God I was not that poor guy. Here (Playa) we have it a little easier because some of us speak Spanish and for those that don't, well there is always someone around that can stand up for you. But over there by the time you find someone to translate for you or figure out the gringo system you die.

Chiapanecos do not use the bus lines operated out of Playa del Carmen's two main bus stations. They take old bus lines that transport people to San Cristóbal for half the price of what is paid for other main bus lines, such as ADO Mexican bus-line which charges around US\$80. However, paying a cheaper rate also means having to accept the possibility of enduring a treacherous ride. I was told stories of long hours on old rundown busses where drivers fell asleep or drove intoxicated and where thievery was commonplace. I asked him if he ever thought of migrating to the United States, and his response was similar to other answers that I had received. I asked this same question of all the construction workers that I interviewed because I wanted to find out why Quintana Roo was such a popular place to migrate among Chiapanecos as opposed to the United States.

I have thought about it, but I would never go. I have heard stories from many friends (from Chiapas) and others who are up there (the US) and they hate it. They either come back or just deal with the miserable gringo way of life.

Then I asked him about his living experiences in Playa and he responded:

Some things are better here than Chiapas, but what really bothers me is the stares I get from strangers, especially on the beach and then in my own little space I sometimes get bothered by other migrants or the police.

It was these same stares and glares that bothered other indigenous construction workers that I interviewed. They explained their frustration with how oftentimes tourists and other non-indigenous workers regarded them as dirty, violent criminals.

For many Chiapaneco migrants, their way of life is shaped by the economy of the Riviera Maya itself. The third-world wages and first-world retail prices in the Riviera Maya make it extremely difficult for many migrants to afford a decent living.¹⁷² The biggest concern in Quintana Roo of the young migrant from the sierra of Chiapas, is his income. He earns about US\$650 dollars a month, which is very high for Mexican standards. Yet, this income is barely enough for him to survive.¹⁷³

I pay US\$130 dollars a month for the room I share with relatives outside of Cancún, I pay about US\$60 in child support for my son who I never see, another US\$140 in transportation a month, and then anywhere from US\$200 to US\$250 in food---leaving me with practically nothing for personal expenses (healthcare, clothing, and extra spending money).

Playa del Carmen

Since religious institutions play a significant role in migrant communities, I found it important to first establish contacts with authorities from the Catholic Church in Playa del Carmen. The only contact information I had were names, which meant I had to ask around the community to locate the individuals. I began my search by asking for the local church. Unfortunately, I kept being directed to the chapel on *Quinta Avenida* that is visited by tourists.

¹⁷² A liter of water costs around \$1.50-2.00 and a kilo of tortillas cost around \$1.50.

¹⁷³ The Chiapaneco migrant pays \$200 a month for a room in Cancún's squatters, \$150 a month on meals and about \$35 a month for his daily bus trip to Cancún-Puerto Morelos-Cancún.

Finally, I boarded the local bus and headed to the *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in the Luis Rolando Colosio community.¹⁷⁴ On this bus, I could see the faces of the workforce of Playa del Carmen without their uniforms. Although I stood out as a tourist, I felt much more comfortable in the Colosio neighborhood than anywhere near the *Quinta Avenida*. It reminded me of the same comfort that I felt as when I visited the Mexican barrios in different cities in the United States. When I arrived at *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, I asked for the parish priest but was informed by the parish secretary that he was in Chiapas. I was soon redirected back to the hotel zone where I was told that perhaps someone at the *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* could have more information concerning the issue.

The weekend began the following day, so I took advantage of my time off by visiting local businesses located away from the main strip of Playa del Carmen. Next to the local healthcare clinic, I came across a *pollo asado* (grilled chicken) diner. It was around 2:00 P.M., and it was crowded with workers from the area. I developed a bond with my waiter soon after he realized that I spoke Spanish. I tried not to discuss the details of my research with him because I knew the manager of the diner and other workers were listening. The young man became hesitant when I mentioned that I wanted to meet Guatemalan migrants to the area. He explained to me that it was going to be rather difficult to try to get a Guatemalan to talk to me.

¹⁷⁴ I recalled the name of the area from the interview with the journalist in Cancún. He explained how this community had sprung up in recent years and was contributing to the fact that Playa was becoming México's fastest growing city.

I know a couple of guys from there and I think a Honduran as well. It's hard to know if they are telling me the truth because they all want to pass as Chiapanecos. But trust me, I can tell who really is *Chapin* [Guatemalan].

"Really?" I asked.

Of course, Chiapaneco's are really talkative, they are not timid, and they will look at you in the eye when you talk to them, but the *Chapines* are scared shitless people.¹⁷⁵

I found this comment quite interesting because to me most indigenous Maya that I had met seemed apprehensive at first. After consistently eating *pollo asado* at the diner several times a week, I established a friendship with the young man and learned that he was a 19-year-old from the Flores region of Guatemala. He mentioned that there are various Central Americans working in Playa del Carmen, but as he had previously mentioned, they all feared deportation or extortion by local authorities. He had worked in the area since he was 16 years old and had learned plenty of Mexican slang from working in construction, janitorial services, bars, and restaurants. He explained that he had been intimidated the first time we met because I carried around a little green notebook. Soon after, I stopped walking around with my field notes and began to engage more in conversations with the workers until they had become more acquainted with me.

The following Monday, I waited patiently outside the *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* for the church office to open. I met with the high priest at *Nuestra Señora del Carmen*. The priest explained to me that it was very common to witness workers sleeping out on the church lawn during the weekends after being kicked out of their

¹⁷⁵ Interview by author, July 29, 2008, Playa del Carmen.

worker camps. Also, new immigrants usually arrive during the weekends from Chiapas to find work for the following week. According to the high priest,

This is one of the main reasons why we really need a *casa del migrante* (migrant home) built here in Playa del Carmen. We all hope for such a place for migrants to seek a safe haven, but a tremendous amount of cooperation is needed among different actors.¹⁷⁶

Through the cleric I was introduced to the director of the Caritas Internationalist branch in Playa del Carmen.¹⁷⁷ It was another scorching, muggy July day when I met the director. She asked me to help her load her little Chevy car with donations that had been dropped off at the church, and then she took me to the outskirts of the city to the Caritas office, which looks more like a storage room. Starbucks had previously donated leftover sandwiches, but today it is *Bodega Aurrerá* that continues to donate fruit and vegetables every Monday, and sometimes hotels contribute second-hand sheets and towels.¹⁷⁸ Caritas also provides migrants with some medical assistance in the form of medications and basic check-ups.

On one of the days that I was out with the director, a young migrant from Michoacán approached us needing assistance to fill a prescription. The young man commented that he arrived in Playa about a week ago and had still not found a place to stay. The construction site he had recently applied to had asked for a physical and it was then that he learned he had a viral infection. The director and I walked with him to the pharmacy around the block and she purchased the generic form of the

¹⁷⁶ Interview by author, August 4, 2008, Playa del Carmen. Land in Playa del Carmen is very expensive and has very restrictive measures.

¹⁷⁷ The headquarters for Caritas in Quintana Roo is located in Cancún.

¹⁷⁸ Bodega Aurrerá is owned by Wal-Mart, México's biggest private employer.

medication.¹⁷⁹ She later told me that she always directly purchases the medication herself because of the possibility that migrants could spend it on something else, which oftentimes includes alcohol, drugs, or prostitutes.

As my fieldwork evolved, I began to realize how poor work conditions and isolation from family and friends were impacting these migrant workers' lives and the way they cope with these uncertainties. For example, instead of having a legitimate recreational location, these migrants spend their weekends abusing alcohol and walking along the highway intoxicated. In addition to drug and alcohol abuse, desolate construction workers turn to both male and female prostitutes in the Riviera Maya.

I came across the town of Puerto Juárez during my first day in Cancún while I was searching for the offices of a local newspaper. Puerto Juárez is located five miles north of Cancún, but because of the rapid expansion of Cancún, this town seems engulfed by the city of Cancún.¹⁸⁰ I grabbed a taxi that day after being exhausted from walking several blocks in the sweltering sun with a gigantic backpack. The taxi cab-driver, who was a migrant from México City, explained that most of the construction near Puerto Juárez was of future condominiums and villas. The first thing that I noticed while he chatted away was the flashy black seat covers of the driver and passenger side. The backside of these covers read *Pleasure Palace an*

¹⁷⁹ See Illustration 3.

¹⁸⁰ Puerto Juárez also serves as a dock for passengers who are traveling to the island of Las Islas Mujeres.

Adult Oasis in glittery bold writing. I asked the taxicab driver what kind of clientele went to such a place and what kind of people they employed.

Of course, it's the international tourists who come for 'spa services,' which quite often those erotic adult massages lead to other things. Most of the women in such places are Cuban, South American, and East European.

I asked him what type of services construction workers looked for. He stated:

Those *hijos de la chingada* [sons of bitches] bring their dirty habits to this place. They go to abandoned buildings like those over there (he pointed to some old rundown buildings alongside Puerto Juárez) and they roll around with cheap women, because that is all they can afford...the majority of the women are *indias* [indigenous] from other villages. In the end, the whole group contaminates themselves and then spread it around to others.

I really did not see the distinction that my taxi cab-driver was trying to make, besides that one was in a luxurious private "palace" and the other was in a run-down room.

Perhaps owing to tourists and upper-class Mexicans being out-of-place, they stereotype the workers as robbers, drug dealers, or even rapists on the beach. Some migrants mentioned to me that on their days off they avoided the beach just so they would not have to deal with constant police confrontations. Indigenous construction workers can usually be distinguished from others on the beaches of the Playa del Carmen on the weekends. They usually stroll up and down the shore in their best Sunday clothing as though they were back in their hometown plazas.¹⁸¹ They can be seen wearing clean, pressed jeans, sharp hats, sandals or sometimes boots, and tucked-in, spotless shirts.

¹⁸¹ See Illustration 4.

Alicia Re Cruz states that the indigenous Chan Kom Maya migrants' socioeconomic patterns and worldviews have brought different images to Cancún.

This intricate setting of blurred, invisible, confusing, urban-rural borders within rural [Chan Kom] or the urban [Cancún] landscape compromises the scenario of the diluting limits of the within the dichotomic First/Third, developed/underdeveloped, civilized/primitive worlds. Although every newspaper reader or television watcher knows them as integral parts of the world, people still conceive the 'other' as a different category that does not share the characteristics and privileges of the First, developed, and civilized world.¹⁸²

The Chiapaneco construction workers struggle like the Chan Kom migrants in Cancún, but they also must fight to be accepted in all levels of society in the Riviera Maya. In addition to being unacknowledged in the cosmopolitan world, they struggle to be recognized by authorities and other indigenous migrants from Tabasco, Campeche and the Yucatán.

The local police are known to extort the construction workers, especially on the weekends when the workers have been paid.

No one seems to care about what happens to us [the workers]. If someone were to rip apart the mangrove or take a piece of rock from Chichen Itza, then authorities would be after them. But when it comes to abuse towards *living human beings* absolutely no one seems to care or react because we continue to be the forgotten *indios*. Except the media who only seems to sensationalize our stories, while the authorities desensitize them.¹⁸³

I understood the worker's statement when I picked up a copy of the local newspaper in Playa del Carmen one morning. The title of the front page story read *¡Fuera*

¹⁸² Re Cruz, "Thousand," 290.

¹⁸³ Interview by author, August 2, 2008, Playa del Carmen.

Sesos! (Outside Brains!) in big bold red letters and had a huge abhorrent picture of dead worker. In the caption it stated:

Horrific: The worker known only as ‘El Chalan’ was savagely murdered at a work site in Ejidal. He presented an exhibition of a battered brain.¹⁸⁴

The story presented no clear accounts from any of the workers at the site or clearly identified the worker; the workers’ voices were absent.

Through the Caritas director I met an older Veracruz immigrant who opened his home as a migrant housing center with the help from the high priest of the Church of Guadalupe. This man does not charge the tenants and gains a meager income from his small restaurant that serves inexpensive quick dinners. His home is recognized by many Chiapaneco immigrants by word of mouth, by other migrants, through Caritas, or sometimes recommended by parishes around the city. At his place, I was able to interact with the workers’ in their own living space.

Typically around 25 workers live there on the weekends and about 10 during the week. The first night I arrived there were four men, including one young man and his younger sister who was about 14. It was dinner time, so workers were arriving to eat after their long shifts. As I sat in the restaurant area, I noticed other young men walking by. The majority looked as though they were between the ages of 17 and 20.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ “Fuera Sesos.” *Periódico Quequi*, Playa del Carmen, México. August 5, 2008.

¹⁸⁵ According to the study, 80% of the migrants interviewed are male and 3 out of 4 are between the ages of 15 and 34. About 60% are married and have kids and only about 20% bring their families with them to Quintana Roo. “Problemática,” 39.

A young man and his sister, the tenant of the house, and about four other migrants slept in the dining area room. The siblings had just arrived from the highlands of Simojovel three days prior to my visit. The young man explained to me, while his 14-year-old sister thoughtfully listened:

I grew up surrounded by a family that demanded democracy, liberty, and justice for all. My parents were firm believers that we would someday receive indigenous autonomy. But I had to leave because I would die before that would ever happen.

He was only seven years old when his parents participated in the EZLN.

I have to leave behind all that Zapatista nonsense. I am the oldest man in the family and I also have a wife and a son to care for. Because, like the saying goes, *Para tragar hay que trabajar* [In order to eat you must work].¹⁸⁶

In the patio area, I met two young Chiapaneco men who were pouring concrete in order to establish the base for a bathroom. From the size of the concrete, I could tell that this was not a typical bathroom that fit a shower, toilet, and sink; rather it was a small space for a toilet to be installed. What crossed my mind at that moment was not how 20 workers could use one bathroom, but what these workers were currently using as a toilet. Regardless of the circumstances, I was standing less than a couple miles from the Quinta Avenida where people dine with \$100 bottles of wine, spend \$500 on Dolce Gabbana sunglasses, and underage spring-breakers get inebriated off tequila.

The tenant paid about US\$300 dollars a month for his cramped living area in the slums of Playa del Carmen. Unlike other segregated living areas around the

¹⁸⁶ Interview by author, August 5, 2008, Playa del Carmen.

world, Playa del Carmen's extremely high cost of living rarely allows migrants to save money unless they live in poor circumstances like the Chiapaneco migrants. The two young men showed me around the enclosed room. In this 8x12 room, I noticed two small twin size mattress pads that covered the concrete floor.¹⁸⁷ A young man from Las Margaritas, Chiapas humorously expressed:

During the weekends this room alone could fill up with about ten men. Sometimes even men sleep sitting. But this is still better than sleeping at the gross camps.

The young migrant seemed to be deemphasizing his hardships. However, by then I had learned how the social arrangements the Riviera Maya systematically subordinate and take advantage of the workers, putting them into harm's way and at risk to various forms of suffering.

After analyzing my data, I have come to understand that Chiapencos face hardship in their migration experiences, but in spite of that, they continue to migrate to the Riviera Maya. Most Chiapanecos who migrate to Quintana Roo come from the highlands of Chiapas, which is the most marginalized region in Chiapas. In contrast, Chiapanecos from the Pacific Coast and the Sierra Madre region, which are among the least marginalized regions of Chiapas, are the ones migrating to the United States (See maps 2 and 5). Therefore, the Chiapanecos from these regions are likely to have the financial and social resources to make the migration journey north, while Chiapanecos from the highlands must search other places for economic advancement. The Riviera Maya is significantly closer to Chiapas than the United States and can

¹⁸⁷ See Illustration 5.

also provide advancement opportunities. In addition, stricter immigration policies in the United States, stringent border enforcement at the U.S.-México border, the high expenses associated with the border crossing, and the suffering U.S. economy have all contributed to high rates of Chiapaneco migration to Quintana Roo.

Migrant construction workers from Chiapas commonly face exploitation of working conditions, living conditions, health, hygiene and nutrition, as well as challenges to social integration because of the powerful capitalist structure and uneven development in northern Quintana Roo. According to U.K. journalist Toby Shelley, it is important to see the abuse of migrant labor as a continuum because the exploitation of labor is driven by profit, and that profit depends on getting more out of a workforce than what that workforce is paid.¹⁸⁸

At one end of the scale is the paring of conditions of employment, stretching of working hours, denial of sick leaves or holiday pay, allotment of jobs no one else wants to do, being switched from workplace to workplace, arduous travel. Towards the middle there are dramatic swings in working hours, fourteen hours a day one month and no work the next, gross underpayment, skimming wages, excessive deductions for substandard accommodation and dangerous transport, fees for dubious services, isolation and workplace bullying. Further along yet, there is what amounts to bonded labour and other forms of forced labour...At the furthest extreme are the children, women and men that are trafficked.¹⁸⁹

In the Riviera Maya, construction employees typically work 12 to 14 hour days, surpassing the limits set in the Mexican labor law that states employees must be paid overtime after nine hour work shifts. In México, the employer is responsible for staffing labor inspectors and for the health and safety of these workers. Moreover,

¹⁸⁸ Toby Shelley, "Exploited: Migrant Labour in the New Global Economy," (London: Zed Books, 2007), 6

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 7.

the Mexican Constitution “assures” human rights for all workers, which seems counterintuitive to what indigenous Chiapaneco migrants experience in México’s “paradise.” Yet, the Mexican government has done very little to address the issues of protecting migrants’ rights in this region. This has become a complex phenomenon that is not enforced by either the Mexican national or the international human rights agenda.

Human Rights and Workers Rights

México has ratified numerous international conventions relating to labor and migrant rights, such the International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions and United Nations (UN) Conventions. However, these policies only appear effective on paper. México has ratified both the ILO conventions on unions and discrimination and permits labor unions, which are plentiful, in places of employment. Additionally, México ratified the *UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families* (ICMW) on March 8, 1999, the most comprehensive international treaty that deals with the rights of migrant workers.

According to international labor migration specialist and human rights lawyer Ryszard Cholewinski, the ICMW and the ILO Conventions have some limiting factors, “Future new instruments are needed to protect workers, above all states must submit to legally binding resolutions for the proper protection of all migrants,

whether irregular or not or national or international.”¹⁹⁰ This is particularly apparent in the case of México where migration policy has been more concerned about protecting migrants abroad than actually protecting migrants within its own borders.

In the context of international human rights, workers’ rights often receive very little attention. In a similar way, trade unions and labor leaders rarely enlist the support of human rights groups to defend worker rights.¹⁹¹ Quite often the discourse of human rights focuses on civil and political rights and less on economic, social, and cultural rights. Chiapaneco workers in the Riviera Maya have limited rights with regards to housing, food, and employment. Consequently, construction workers in the Riviera Maya are constantly exposed to exploitation and inequality in the form of meager or nonexistent wages, poor living conditions, inadequate job standards, violence, drug abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and discrimination, all within México’s “paradise.”

¹⁹⁰Ryszard Cholewinski, “Protecting Migrants in a Globalized World,” *Migration Information Source*, March 2005. Migration Policy Institute, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=293>, (accessed 4 November 4 2008).

¹⁹¹ Leary, 25.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The findings of this research, based on my field work and statistical data, lead to the conclusion that Chiapanecos are continuing to migrate to northern Quintana Roo for economic advancement opportunities they can not attain in Chiapas, regardless of their vulnerability to mistreatment by the receiving society. México's Riviera Maya is expected to triple in development in the upcoming years and the Costa Maya is expected to double in the next five years. Development will continue the high demand for more construction laborers in the Riviera Maya. Yet, often these workers', mostly indigenous young men, dreams of achieving prosperity are hindered by violations of their working and living rights in México's Riviera Maya.

Through ethnographic accounts of the workers I have examined how dominant forces have rendered migrants susceptible to forms of exploitation. Furthermore, I have highlighted some of the socioeconomic patterns that weaken Maya migrants' status within society in the Riviera Maya. Pervasive exploitation has limited migrants in the Riviera Maya, specifically Chiapanecos from access to basic living rights and working rights because of the social, political, and economic power structures that exist within the context of globalization.

Overview

Migration in México's southern region, particularly in the state of Chiapas has had a significant history of cross border mobility since the 19th century. Chiapas is now a receiving, transit, and sending state of migration. Migration movements in

southern México, particularly by indigenous populations, have occurred for various reasons, such as economic crises, natural disasters, the decline of coffee prices, political turmoil, and above all because of the lack of economic and social developments in the region.

Chiapas has evolved into a major sending state of migration to the United States and to other Mexican states, besides Veracruz, Tabasco, and México City. Northern Quintana Roo is an important destination for Chiapaneco migration due primarily to the jobs in construction and the growth in global tourism.

Limitations of the Research

This research is limited because of the short amount of time that I spent in the field and also because a large number of my interviews were informal. More time in the field would allow for more detailed interviews with construction workers and other actors. As previously stated, this study began with the intention of looking at Guatemalan migration to Quintana Roo. In addition, more time in the field with informants, such as those who are undocumented, would enhance the relationship and acceptance level of these migrants.

Consequently, using both quantitative and qualitative data at both the micro and macro levels of society in Quintana Roo could significantly enhance this study. Spending more time in important core cities of Quintana Roo, such as Cancún and the capital city of Chetumal would allow for more interviews and data collection with state government and non-government actors, as well as with university scholars. Conducting research with government officials and other actors in municipalities,

such as Benito Juárez (Cancún) and Solidaridad (Playa del Carmen) would enhance this study at the municipal level.

Directions for future research

Education of human rights protection for these migrants must be incorporated at the local, national, and international levels. The new Casa de Migrante in Playa del Carmen, which initiated in December 2008, marks a new direction in non-governmental assistantship towards helping migrants in the Riviera Maya. Although this residence is not large enough to house migrants, it does include a team of specialists, such as an anthropologist, a sociologist, and an attorney. Future research and collaboration with organizations such as Caritas and other actors, such as state and municipal governments, is needed to support the design and implementation of public policies towards migrants in the Riviera Maya. Greater accountability must also be met by the Mexican government and their own constitutional laws. The Mexican government has neglected its protection and attention for migrants within its territory. For the most part the Mexican government has failed to recognize the immigration phenomenon within its territories as a bilateral and multilateral problem. Furthermore, México claims on paper that it protects migrants, international and their own, but this is by no means sufficient to guarantee migrants human rights protection will be put into practice.

Nevertheless, many issues need to be tackled in México's tourist sector. It is difficult to understand if the longstanding social structures in México's Riviera Maya can ever be transformed. If underlying causes and issues that maintain the status quo

are continuously missed through the discourse of researchers, policy makers, and capitalist societies, there will continue to be social inequalities. As long as corruption continues to be the norm for many of those at the top of the world's social-economic structures, there may never be a response in ending inequality and exploitation.

While the Riviera Maya and the Costa Maya continue to drive tourists to their crystal turquoise waters, wildlife adventures, and luxurious hotels, what will happen when this "paradise" comes to an end? Will another Acapulco emerge forcing migrants to the Riviera Maya to look elsewhere for dreams of prosperity?

Illustrations

Illustration 1: Migrant construction workers waiting for the bus.



Photo by author, August 2, 2008, Puerto Morelos.

Illustration 2: Public notice by the Mexican Secretary of Labor and Social Provision (STPS).

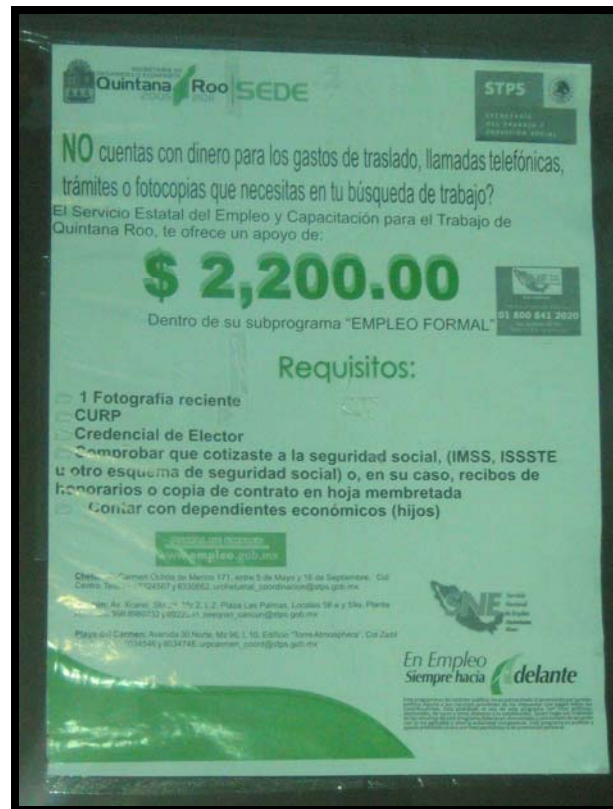


Photo by author, August 4, 2008, Playa del Carmen.

Illustration 3: NGO employee assisting a migrant with the purchase of medication.



Photo by author, August 5, 2008.

Illustration 4: Migrant construction workers on a Sunday afternoon.



Photo by author, August 3, 2008, Playa del Carmen.

Illustration 5: Migrant living space, typically about 10 men stay in this room.

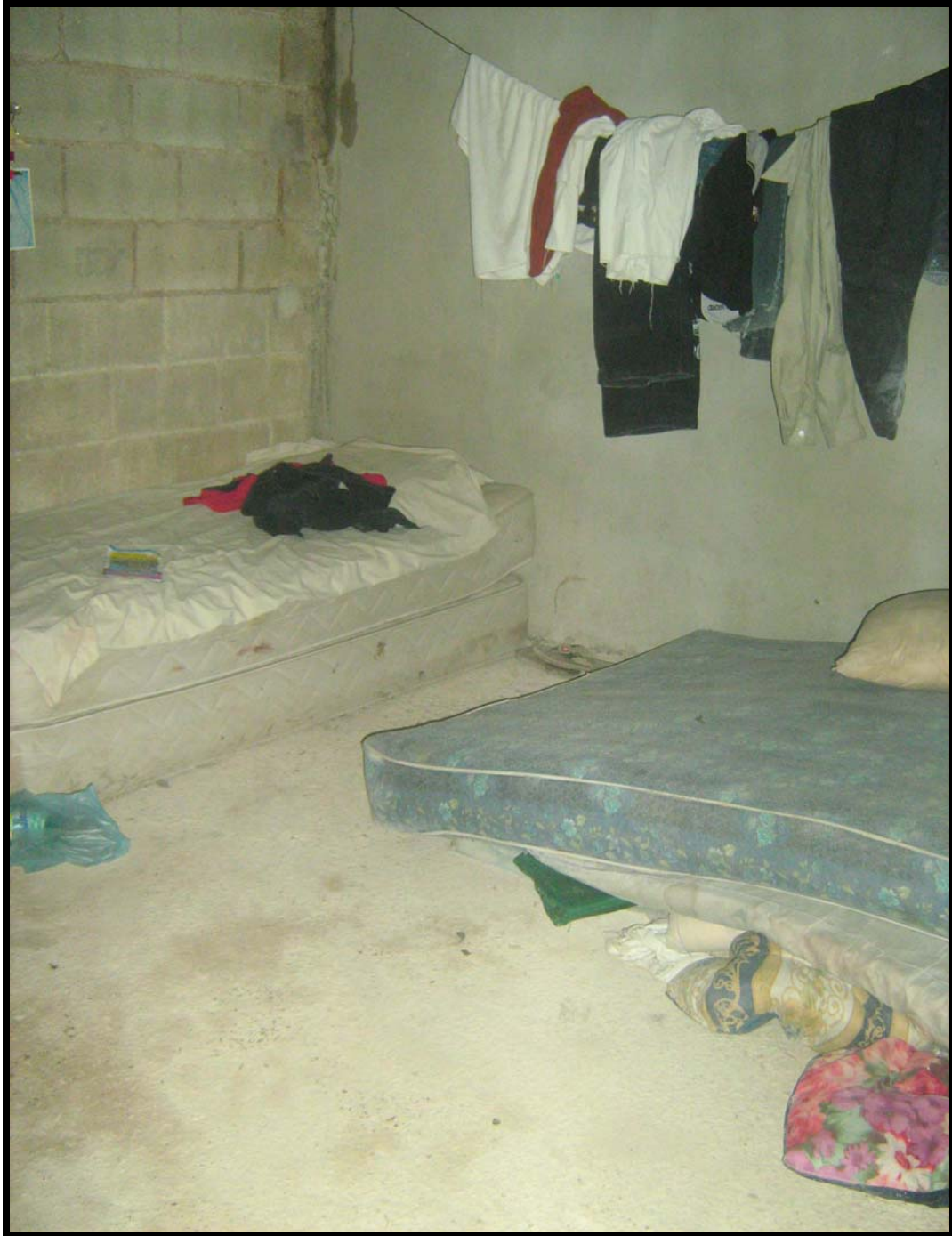


Photo by author, August 5, 2008, Playa del Carmen.

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